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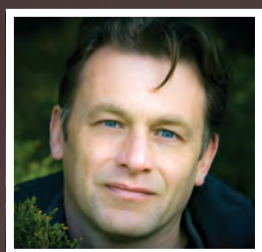


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CHRIS GOMERSALL (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)



**IT** is generally accepted that the key to preserving species diversity lies in protecting habitat hot-spots. At a national level in Britain, many such areas lie in rural countryside

– think of the mosaic of habitats in Scotland's Spey Valley, scenic Poole Harbour with its tidal creeks, bogs, heaths and forests, or the rambling coastal marshes of Norfolk and Suffolk (where the flagship RSPB reserve of Minsmere alone regularly boasts 90-100 breeding bird species).

At a local level, however, and especially in built-up areas, biodiversity is sustained through an alternative network of smaller wildlife oases and green corridors which are every bit as important. They may be less rich in species but, with more than 80 per cent of Britain's population living in built-up areas, they are no less significant in other ways: from gardens and parks to reservoirs and former industrial sites returned by accident or design to nature, they provide not just local birding havens but an essential connection to the wildlife around us.

It is these 'built-up birding' sites that we celebrate in this special issue. Our towns, cities and conurbations offer far more than 'urban birding' alone – indeed true urban sites are generally poor in terms of biodiversity (albeit with a few notable exceptions such as Peregrine Falcon and Black Redstart, this month's cover bird). Instead, what we highlight in this month's choice of where-to-watch guides (pages 25-32), featured local patch (pages 54-56) and major focus on man-made habitats (pages 34-37) is the wealth of opportunities to watch birds, maintain our link with the natural world and motivate our interest to preserve biodiversity, wherever we can. As much as we love to visit the Scottish Highlands, Suffolk or the south coast, it's that direct doorstep connection to birds that constantly emphasises the intrinsic and aesthetic value of the wider natural world, and reinforces the need to protect it.

*Dominic Mitchell*

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AURÉLIEN AUDEVARD

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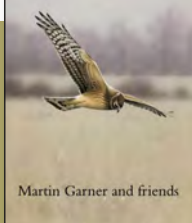
identify some of the best sites in built-up areas, including two great RSPB reserves in Weymouth, Dorset. Plus: where to find your own Ring-billed Gull, January's target bird.

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CONOR MOLLOY





## Hot foot from Iceland

**W**inter's battalions of Pink-footed Geese have long settled into their winter homes, with flocks amassing on fields on the east coast from Northumberland to north Norfolk, and even over to the Low Countries, where most will remain until spring. Birders will be hoping to witness or photograph the spectacle of birds arriving at or departing from roosts at dusk or dawn, some still harbouring thoughts of vagrant Cackling or Ross's Geese among the uniform arrivals of grey geese, though migration has long since finished.

When they first arrived from Iceland, the flock pictured broke all records at Martin Mere WWT, Lancashire, as an unprecedented 45,800 arrived on 2 October, beating the previous highest single-day total of 36,000, so there are plenty to be seen this winter if you can brave the cold. This is the best time to appreciate these flocks as a whole for the marvels that they are, and it is also possible to be awed by the masses of winter thrushes, roosting Starlings and waders on the same day out, if you choose the right site. ■



# Bexington bustard is brief

With no long stayers for 16 years and only one British record this century, Little Bustard was much desired by birders; but the twitch was not to be.



**Little Bustard: West Bexington, Dorset, 18 November 2014**

**HAVING** had one of the reintroduced Great Bustards from Salisbury Plain, Somerset, fly through his patch at the end of October, Mike Morse could have been forgiven for pinching himself when he picked up an unusual bird in flight. It revealed itself to be a bustard when it banked and seemed to drop down into a field, between the car park and where he and his companion were standing.

He managed to take a couple of record shots, catching the all-important large white flashes on the outer wing, and they then set off somewhat trepidaciously to try and find the bird.

At this point, they were both still expecting to see a Great Bustard, but this

delicate-looking, short-necked and obviously small bird could only be a Little Bustard, a species which neither had seen for a long time.

The bird was not grounded for long, suddenly flying off inland to the north-west behind some trees. A run back to the car for a field guide confirmed what they suspected – they had just seen and photographed a Little Bustard on their patch. It was time to put the news out.

The pair, now augmented with some quick-off-the-mark visiting birders, then thoroughly scoured the surrounding areas for the bird, but it was nowhere to be seen, and never showed up again.

The last record of Little Bustard in Britain was a one-day adult male on Wingletang Down, St Agnes, Scilly, in March 2002. The last truly accessible bird

that stayed long enough for keen birders to twitch it was on The Lizard, Cornwall, from 26-29 October 1996. There is only one other Dorset record, a welcome and widely seen winter bird that stayed from 30 December to 5 January 1988 at Coward's Marsh near Christchurch. The majority of British and Irish records are of one-day birds, but surprisingly for a rare vagrant the largest monthly share of birds has been logged in December, with November and January also having a substantial quantity. Clearly, for the winter rarity-finder, this species should be very much on the radar. Most birds have been found in Norfolk, Suffolk or Cornwall.

Also unusually for a vagrant, a good 71 per cent of records have been of adults – occurrences of other rare species are lost immature birds for the most part.

Records have decreased in

the last half century, as the species has undergone a substantial decline in Iberia and France due to habitat destruction and changes in farming methods; BirdLife International classes the species as Near Threatened, and with the majority of the world population in Iberia, this is likely to be the source of most of the wanderers that arrive here. ■

## STATS & FACTS

**First recorded:** location unknown, East Sussex, December 1774

**Last recorded:** St Agnes, Scilly, 22 March 2002

**Previous British records:** 214

**Previous Irish records:** 9

**Mega rating:** ★★★★★



The delicate head of the bird is typical of Little Bustard, which is about the size of a Common Gull and has an unusual flight style with grouse-like wing-beats and glides, noted by the observers of this bird.



Though difficult to age with certainty, what can be seen of the wing coverts appears to show a white ground colour, indicative of an adult female; the apparent dark belly is probably shadow.



# Red tails draw the crowds

In a replay of events three years ago, two different male Eastern Black Redstarts were found in Britain late in the season.



Whether they are split or not, Eastern Black Redstart forms are certainly attractive birds, with plumage somewhat midway between Common and Black Redstarts. This is the longer-staying apparent first-winter male on St Mary's, Scilly.

Eastern Black Redstarts: Scalby, North Yorkshire, 29 November-3 December and St Mary's, Scilly, from 30 November 2014



JOSH JONES

**Above:** gaudy and gorgeous, the Scalby bird was a particularly striking individual, and drew quite a crowd with its contrasting, almost luminous colours.

**Inset:** though not quite visible here, experienced observers state that the birds' wing formula is that of *phoenicuroides*, and it also lacked the deeper dark back of the closely related *rufiventris*.



**FIRST** identified as a Common Redstart on 29 November, such an ID mistake involving an unusual redstart was perhaps understandable, with such a profusion of orange on the bird's underparts, and the absence of extralimital forms from many field guides.

However, after a couple of days, it became apparent that the visitor was another Black Redstart of the subspecies *phoenicuroides*, colloquially known as 'Eastern Black Redstart', and that the

contrasting plumage colours were typical of an adult male.

The very next day a further bird of the same form, only slightly less striking in first-winter male plumage, appeared on Scilly, at Shark's Pit on St Mary's.

This double whammy mirrors the events of

November 2011, when adult males turned up mid-month at Foreness Point, Kent, and Holy Island, Northumberland, and proved just as popular.

The Scalby bird in particular was very showy, and remained loyal to the front gardens of one road, perhaps equating the pebbled and paved driveways with its somewhat barren home habitats in Central Asia.

Despite the large number of birders who went to see these last four birds, the possibility of them getting a tick is still moot. The *phoenicuroides* subspecies complex is basal to the other two Black Redstart clades (that is, groups of each other's closest relatives), but all cluster quite closely together and appear to not yet be separate enough to be 'splittable'. Add to this the gradual, almost clinal, changes as one travels east and the forms' as yet unknown capacity for intergradation, and the British list will stay resolutely unincreased by one for the foreseeable future.

Still, with an eye-catching and well-performing bird like the Yorkshire individual, who's complaining? ■

MARTIN GOODEY

JOSH JONES



# Wheatears into winter

With migration nearly at an end, what better way to go out on a high than with a wave of Desert Wheatears? This year came up trumps, and added Isabelline, too.

The female Desert Wheatear at Gorleston-on-Sea, Norfolk, was particularly showy, frequenting the beach, boatyard, amusements car park and chalet fronts during its stay from 7-14th.



Desert Wheatears in Britain: from November 2014

**BIRDERS** are now getting used to a decent showing of Desert Wheatears come late autumn, but last year logged just one: an adult male at Severn Beach, Gloucestershire, for five days from 11 December.

Fortunately, this year was different, and after a lone male at Castle Bay, on Skomer, Pembrokeshire, on 28 October, another six were racked up in November: a male at Reculver, Kent, from 6-9th; a male at Lowestoft, Suffolk, from 6-9th; a female at Gorleston-on-Sea, Norfolk, from 7-14th; a male at Montrose, Angus, from 16-19th; a female at Gwennap Head coastguards, Porthgarra, Cornwall, from 26 November until at least

9 December; and a male at Winterton Dunes NNR, Norfolk, from 5-8 December. There were also at least three other unconfirmed reports of single-day birds.

The most northern of this autumn's occurrences was this locally popular bird at Montrose Beach, Angus, on 16th, a male which lingered until 19th.



The second of November's female Desert Wheatears was this bird at Porthgarra, Cornwall, on 26th; it remained well into December.

## STATS & FACTS

**First recorded:** Gartmorn Dam, Upper Forth, 26 November 1880

**Last recorded:** Severn Beach, Gloucestershire, 11-14 December 2013

**Previous British records:** 133

**Previous Irish records:** 8

**Mega rating:** ★★☆☆

**IAN HASTIE** The pattern of this autumn's birds produced few surprises. The preponderance of males is typical – the ratio normally comes out at around 2:1, just like this autumn. The dominance of records from the east coast and South-West, and England in general, is also typical, and has often led to rumination that one of the eastern subspecies, which are more migratory than the North African forms, is responsible for most British and Irish records. However, the formal position seems to be that dispersing birds of the subspecies *homochroa*, found from Morocco across to Egypt, constitute most of our occurrences, though *deserti*, found

MARTIN ELLIOTT





The disparate appearances of this autumn's Desert Wheatears are clear on this BirdGuides.com map, with birds fairly evenly distributed all over the coast apart from the far north-west; this map also includes unconfirmed reports.

in the Near East, and *atroglaris*, from Central Asia, have also been claimed. Field differences are very subtle, and an in-hand or genetic identification would certainly help decide the source of birds which turn up here. Differences involve size, measurements and variations in the amount of white on the inner webs of the wing feathers, though this is rarely seen.

This year's crop were mostly first-winters, which is also typical of the species, and indeed a majority of other passerine vagrants, dispersing after fledging, with genetic 'knowledge' but no experience of their migration strategies.

Despite November being the best month to find this species, sharp-eyed birders in December still stand a chance, and there are even two records from January, so keep your eyes peeled. ■

MARC READ



This male at Reculver, Kent, on 6th was the second bird to arrive in this autumn's influx.

# Izzy stays for the masses

Isabelline Wheatear: Seaton Snook, Co Durham, 22-27 November 2014



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

**ALONG** with the good showing of Desert Wheatears, a known mega vagrant from south-east Europe, the Near East and Central Asia also turned up: a first-winter Isabelline Wheatear. The bird could be sexed as a male by its almost black lores. It stayed loyal to the same stretch of seaweed-littered beach for five days, before (presumably) heading off to continue its misplaced migration.

The bird quickly grew in stature on the news services, having first been reported as a Northern, then a Desert Wheatear (emphasising that wheatears are not always easy to identify), but was finally and helpfully confirmed

Here, the Durham Isabelline Wheatear shows its diagnostic field characters of contrasting black alula and a proportionately short tail, with a much broader terminal black band than Northern Wheatear.

as Isabelline on its second day, becoming the first for Co Durham.

Droves of photographers have since documented the pale plumage, long legs, long,

sturdy bill and black alula diagnostic of the species, along with less obvious features like the pale yellowish-buff ear coverts and 'stepped' spacing of the primaries (Desert Wheatear's being almost even). It could be readily aged as a first-winter – the most frequent age of British sightings – by the pale edges to its brownish flight feathers, showing substantial fraying and wear, unsurprising in an individual which had probably fledged by June in its native range. ■

## STATS & FACTS

**First recorded:** Rye, East Sussex, late August 1905

**Last recorded:** Martin's Haven, Pembrokeshire, 30 September-10 October 2013

**Previous British records:** 32

**Previous Irish records:** 1

**Mega rating:** ★★★★★



The true industrial incongruity of the background to the Isabelline Wheatear's temporary home can be appreciated in this landscape shot – the bird stayed faithful to its seaweed patch for five days.

SAM VILES



TO an outsider, the identification of the 'Turkestan Shrike' (*phoenicuroides*, the Central Asian form of Isabelline) at Calartha Farm, Pendeen, Cornwall, may have seemed rather long winded. But it might have slipped through the net altogether had it not been quiet on the Cornish rarity front, when the news of a 'Red-backed Shrike' (*collurio*) was promptly phoned in to Mashuq Ahmad, who was birding nearby. He rang me soon after insisting the shrike was not *collurio*, and worth further scrutiny.

The bird's identity was still being debated when I arrived, and my first impressions wrongly favoured *collurio*, as it appeared too rufous above and too heavily marked on the head and body for one of the Isabelline Shrike forms. Brown Shrike (*cristatus*) could be ruled out by the bird's bright orangey rump and tail contrasting with a duller back; more subjectively, it looked neither large headed nor long tailed and short winged, and once it was confirmed that none were missing lacked *cristatus*'s extremely short outermost tail feathers. 'Daurian Shrike' (*isabellinus*, the eastern Asian subspecies of Isabelline) was also dismissed, as the bird showed whitish underparts marked with extensive dark brown chevrons, contrasting with relatively dark upperparts.



MARTIN ELLIOTT

**Left:** the plain reddish upper tail of the bird showed no dark markings to indicate hybridisation. The position of the sun directly behind the observer has slightly warmed the colours of the bird. **Right:** the uniformly rufous underside and square shape of the tail are clearly shown here, with the outermost pair of tail feathers only slightly shorter than the rest. Red-backed Shrike's tail is usually more strongly rounded or graduated, greyer, with more obvious internal markings, and whitish outer webs. Again note the whitish underparts with the faint buff tone enhanced by low sunlight.

## Talking Turkestan

**Martin Elliott** took on the difficulties of nailing this rare form of Isabelline Shrike in field conditions.



MASHUQ AHMAD

**'Turkestan Shrike': Pendeen, Cornwall, 9-16 November 2014**

Numbered from outer to inner primaries, the Isabelline Shrike wing formula is clearly shown. A short p1; p2 short of the wing-tip and the tips of p5 and p6; p3 and p4 equal in length, forming the wing-tip; p5 is the second longest feather; and p6 further back from the wing-tip than p2. The three emarginations on the outer webs of p3 to p5 separate this bird from Red-backed Shrike, which has just two.

Pure *collurio* would not show this bird's uniformly orange tail and wing formula, and crucially three emarginations were visible on the closed wing, not two (Worfolk 2000), along with only five or six primary tips, not seven or eight. In *collurio*, the bird's apparently plain upperparts should actually still be barred,

so the only options left were *phoenicuroides* or a hybrid. Establishing overall plumage tones would be vital, but there were some problems.

On the first day of the bird's stay, the best viewing positions meant it was mostly seen against the light. The resulting contrast against blue backgrounds meant the bird looked remarkably rufous above, and had stark shadows and highlights. My own images were misleading, but Mashuq stayed later and took more representative shots. I sent my photos to Tim Worfolk, and he considered the bird to best fit *phoenicuroides*, though it looked unusually warm above.

When Mashuq and I returned to Calartha on 11th, conditions were a little better. The bird's upperparts appeared to be a dull brown to pale sandy colour. The finding of a young *collurio* at nearby Tregeseal later that day proved useful, enabling close comparison.

The Calartha bird fits Turkestan Shrike almost perfectly: the wing formula, colour and structure of the tail, underparts colour and pattern were 'textbook' and the upperparts were typical, allowing for field conditions. It is hard to

attribute any aspect of the bird's appearance to *collurio*, but as so little is known about hybrids other than adult males, speculation on this is unwise without further research. The Calartha shrike proved a valuable lesson in 'red-tailed shrike' identification and the problems in recording colour tones in the field and from photographs. ■

### REFERENCES

- Worfolk, T. 2000. Identification of Red-backed, Isabelline and Brown Shrikes. *Dutch Birding* 22: 323-362.

### STATS & FACTS

These details are for Isabelline Shrike as a whole, as not all historical records have been identified to subspecies.

**First recorded:** Isle of May, Fife, 26 September 1950

**Last recorded:** Donna Nook, Lincolnshire, 20 October 2013

**Previous British records:** 95

**Previous Irish records:** 1

**Mega rating:** ★★★★★





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Rarities: November 2014

# Chats from the east



**Josh Jones** tells the story of a month in which eastern chats were at a premium, and a brief Little Bustard also excited attention.



IAN HASTIE

This cracking male Desert Wheatear spent three days on Montrose Beach, Angus, from 16 November, and was occasionally joined by a Black Redstart. There was a reasonable influx of this petite and pleasing *Oenanthe* species during the month (see pages 10-11) but, as in previous recent decent showings in 2011 and 2012, numbers didn't reach double figures; atypically, only one individual was found last year.

November's 'big hitter' was the Little Bustard that touched down in coastal fields at West Bexington, Dorset, for a matter of minutes on 18th (see page 8). Its departure was as quick as its arrival and, despite extensive searching throughout that day and the next, it could not be found again. This represents the first British occurrence for 12 years, though the last to be twitchable was as long ago as October 1996 in Cornwall. It is possible that the bird might spend

the winter in southern England, so a reappearance somewhere may yet be on the cards.

The bustard may have been solitary, but several other of the month's highlights turned up in twos. American Coot seems to be rapidly establishing itself as an almost expected winter vagrant rather than the mega-rarity that the 10 (including the Scottish bird of early 2014) previous British and Irish occurrences might suggest. The first to be found was at picturesque Lough Gill

on the north side of the Dingle peninsula, Co Kerry, on 5th; it went on to linger there until the month's end and represents a county first. The second individual was discovered frequenting Loch nam Feithean at Balranald RSPB on North Uist, Outer Hebrides, on 16th, and represents another fine record for this excellent reserve. It too lingered until the close of November and both look set to stay for the winter.

The final days of the month delivered a brace of another high-

calibre rarity. Albeit not yet a split in its own right, the Eastern Black Redstart complex nevertheless look stunning and are extremely rare on our shores: birds of the form *phoenicuroides*, looking rather like the perfect amalgamation of Common and Black Redstarts, are only represented in Britain by belatedly accepted records from 1981 and 2003 and two extremely popular males in Kent and Northumberland in November 2011. Rather like the duo which occurred three years ago, the two

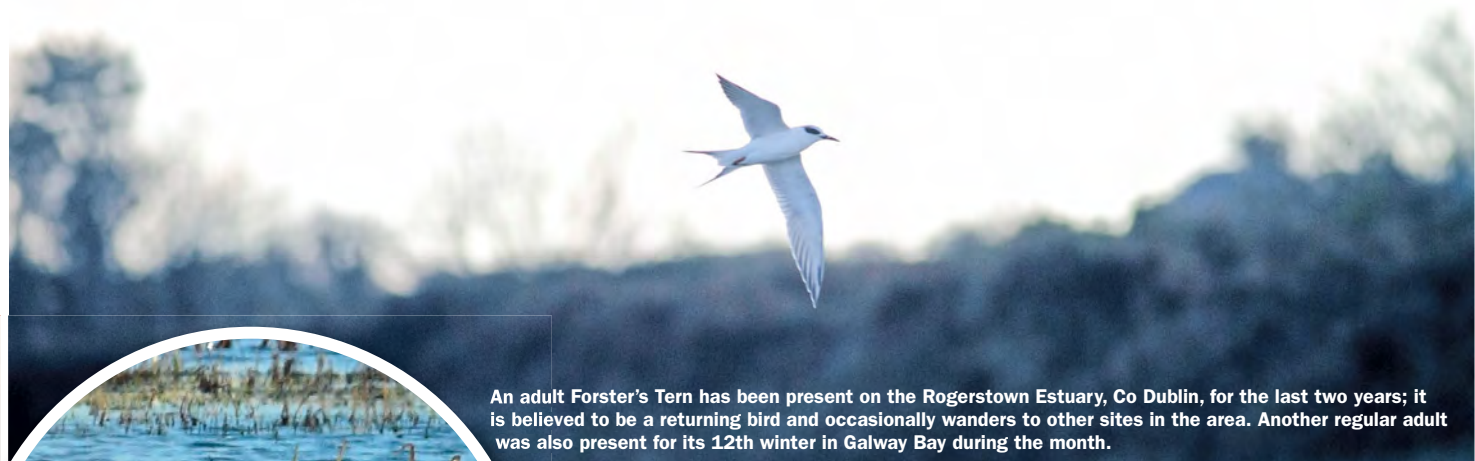


TONY DIXON

Frequenting the chalky beach from 5-9 November, this Citrine Wagtail at Flamborough, East Yorkshire, proved very popular with visitors as migration wound down for the winter.







PAUL AND ANDREA KELLY (WWW.IRISHBIRDMAGES.COM)



**Above:** first seen on 16th, this American Coot at Balranald RSPB, North Uist, Outer Hebrides, looked set to winter, staying well into December and finding the south side of Loch nam Feithean much to its liking.

**Below:** spot the Bonaparte's Gull! This winter-plumaged adult was found on 1 December at Loch Gilp, Argyll, along with five Mediterranean Gulls (a good species for Scotland) and a Little Gull. The rarity in question is almost dead centre in the foreground with Black-headed Gulls.

An adult Forster's Tern has been present on the Rogerstown Estuary, Co Dublin, for the last two years; it is believed to be a returning bird and occasionally wanders to other sites in the area. Another regular adult was also present for its 12th winter in Galway Bay during the month.

further individuals arrived in quick succession, with the first, at Scalby, North Yorkshire, initially identified as a male Common Redstart on 29th (see page 9). Its true identity was realised on the morning of 1 December, following the appearance of another bird on St Mary's, Scilly, the previous evening. Both lingered into the first week of December and showed very well at times, the Yorkshire individual being the brighter, more adult-like bird of the two.

Another species appearing twice was Pacific Diver, though this time both individuals were familiar faces from winters past. The returning Cornish bird was in Mount's Bay on 22nd, favouring the area between St Michael's Mount and Marazion and – unusually for this individual – showing fairly well into December. This bird has been notorious for its unpredictability since it first showed up in February

2007, and a prolonged run in the bay over the winter would no doubt be welcomed by many. If the Cornish bird was tricky to catch up with, then it would be fair to say that the bird in Galway Bay has been very hard to see. Its reappearance (assuming it's the same) off Finvarra Point, Co Clare, on 29th is the first time it's been seen there since mid-February 2011, though there was a report from near Tawin, Co Galway, in April of this year. Galway Bay is huge and a chronic lack of trained eyes no doubt contributes to the elusive nature of this bird, which was an Irish first when it initially showed up in January 2010.

It's now been seven years since the last twitchable Blyth's Pipits graced Cornwall and Scilly in October 2007, and so the identification of a particularly small and 'obvious' Blyth's at St David's Head, Pembs, on 18th was very welcome. Unfortunately the bird had moved on by the following morning; it represents the second of the year following the bird on

Scilly in October (with another appearing in December).

### Wheatear wanderers

November was, on the whole, a mild month and it was no great surprise that we experienced a protracted autumn in terms of birds. A delightfully showy Isabelline Wheatear on the beach at Seaton Snook, Co Durham, from 23-27th represented the latest-ever record of this species in Britain (see page 11), beating the previous latest – a bird shot in Cumbria in 1887 – by 12 days. Its remarkably confiding nature ensured that it was well photographed.

There was also a nice mini-influx of that staple late autumn rarity, Desert Wheatear (see pages 10-11). Following the Pembrokeshire bird in late October, a further five birds appeared around Britain during November – males outnumbered females three to two. The first to arrive were males at Reculver, Kent, and Lowestoft, Suffolk, on 6th. Both showed characteristically well until 9th,



JIM DICKSON



as did the female at Gorleston, Norfolk, from 7-14th. This trio was followed by later arrivals at Montrose, Angus, from 16-19th and Porthgwarra, Cornwall, from 26th.

The autumn's fifth Grey-cheeked Thrush was found at Rerwick, Shetland, on 8th and showed well in gardens there until 19th. This is the third of the season on Shetland and five marks the highest annual total of this species since 1986, when an amazing 11 were recorded across Britain and Ireland.

### Outflanked

A Red-flanked Bluetail was a brief visitor to Hastings CP, East Sussex, on 4th, while two were seen on Shetland: at Voe on 8-9th and a lingering bird at Geosetter from 3-17th. Siberian Stonechats were on the Isle of Wight and in Northumberland early in the month, and a first-winter male hung around near the Sunderland Football Club Academy in Cleadon, Co Durham, from 12-22nd. A fourth bird on Fair Isle from 31 October-2 November was thought to be of the form *stejnegeri*.

Typical late autumn fodder was provided in the form of a handful of Hume's Warbler reports, though seemingly the only confirmed individuals were those at Loch of Strathbeg, Aberdeens, on 16th and a showy bird at Brier Dene, Northumbs, from 22-24th.

Dorset's sixth Isabelline Shrike showed well at Hengistbury Head on 15-16th, while the identification of another at Pendeen, Cornwall, from 9-16th was subject to debate, with some observers feeling the bird showed characteristics of a



MARK STOKELD



**Above: no fewer than six Isabelline Shrikes were in the country during November, including this bird at Hengistbury Head, Dorset, on 16th, the same date as the Cornish bird (see page 12).**

**Inset: widely suspected of being a *blythi* Siberian Lesser Whitethroat, this warbler settled in for some time behind a petrol station in Sunderland, Co Durham, from 3-18th at least, and showed well for many.**

hybrid (see page 12).

In Hampshire, the Franklin's Gull continued to roost at Blashford Lakes until 25th. The Laughing Gull remained at Ballycotton, Co Cork, to

7th at least. An adult Bonaparte's Gull was at Tramore, Co Waterford, on 2nd and the Devon on-and-off bird was again at Dawlish Warren throughout November. Records in

Northumberland came from the Farne Islands on 23rd and Rising Sun CP on 29th. After last being seen on Rogerstown Estuary, Co Dublin, on 4th, the Forster's Tern returned to Galway Bay for its 12th winter on 23rd, when it was seen at Kinvarra. It was then seen at its spiritual home, Claddagh Beach, on 28th.

A juvenile Black Stork was something of a surprise when it flew over St Osyth, Essex, on 15th. It relocated to Trimley Marshes, Suffolk, later that day and the following morning, and was subsequently seen over Hazlewood Marshes, Suffolk, on 17th, Waxham, Norfolk, on 20th and Bradwell, Norfolk, on 24th. Sporting a colour ring, this bird no doubt originates from the Continent where a colour-ringing scheme is well established across several countries.

Rare wildfowl involved the drake King Eider again off Burghead, Moray and Nairn, on 8-9th and the presumably returning female to Ruddon's Point, Fife, on 30th.

The Blue-winged Teal remained near Ashington, Northumbs, until at least 25th, while Lesser Scaup records included the drake bearing a red nasal saddle at Llangorse Lake, Powys – this was fitted in Portugal in December 2013, with the bird last seen there in February 2014. Others were in Berkshire, Glamorgan and Co Kerry. ■

• For full details of all November's sightings, go to [www.birdguides.com](http://www.birdguides.com). To receive free illustrated weekly sightings summaries and other news, sign up at [bit.ly/BGWeeklyNews](http://bit.ly/BGWeeklyNews).

**BIRDBUIDES** 



DAVE PARNABY

Now that birders are more aware of this cryptic and potentially splittable form, putative Stejneger's Stonechats are being identified more frequently; this bird was photographed on Fair Isle, Shetland, on 2nd.



MICHAEL YOUNG-POWELL

Present for just one afternoon on 18th, this Blyth's Pipit at St David's Head, Pembrokeshire, was one of three very widely distributed birds this autumn and winter, with others on Scilly and in West Yorkshire.



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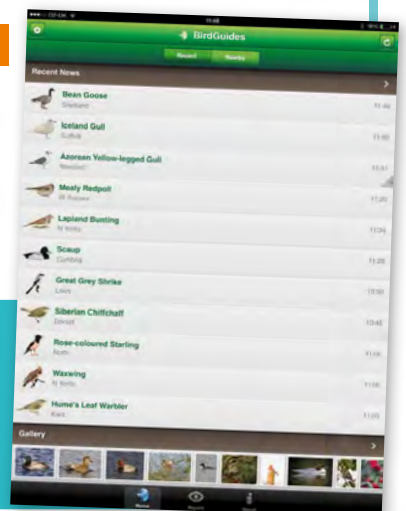
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## Scarcities: November 2014

One of the most popular individuals from this autumn's excellent showing of Rough-legged Buzzards was this individual, photographed hovering at Jevington, East Sussex, on 28th.

# Little Auks at sea, Rough-legs on land

The month featured several lingering summer visitors and a couple of notable influxes, writes **Josh Jones**.

ROGER AND LIZ CHARLWOOD (WWW.WORLDDWILDLIFEIMAGES.COM)



JIM ALMOND (WWW.SHROPSHIREBIRDER.CO.UK)

This showy juvenile Purple Heron was at Capel Gwyn, Anglesey, from 18-25 November, and being the only example of the species in the country, drew many to North Wales during its stay.

For the majority of birders, November was a particularly mild month nationwide with a distinct lack of night frosts or indeed wintry weather in general. However, the rich variety – as well as quantity – of lingering summer migrants was nevertheless impressive, and it'll be particularly interesting to see how many of these attempt to spend the winter on our shores.

By the month's end there were several House Martins lingering as far north as Ayrshire and no shortage of Swallows, including a bird in Kirkwall, Orkney, to 26th; the odd Common Swift was also reported until mid-month.

A Sedge Warbler was reported from the London Wetland Centre WWT on 27th, while on the other side of the capital slightly surreal news from Leyton concerned a lingering Reed Warbler on a traffic island, in the company of up to two Common Whitethroats; both species were still there on 30th. Another Common Whitethroat was reported in Buckinghamshire on 26th, while several Willow Warblers were reported in southern areas. Arguably even more striking was the number

of lingering Whinchats, with at least four reported in the final 10 days of the month, including one as far north as Roseisle, Moray and Nairn, which lingered into December.

## Late in and lingering

Scarce migrants were also fairly relaxed about heading south, as a Wryneck remained on Skokholm, Pembrokeshire, until 12th, while Common Rosefinches were at Uisaed Point, Argyll, on 12th and in Cobh, Co Cork, from 23-27th at least. Several Hoopoes were seen throughout the month, with a bird at Dawlish Warren, Devon, still around on 29th and one on Portland, Dorset, to 30th; at least two more were seen in the latter county during November, with others noted on Shetland and in Suffolk, Kent and Somerset earlier in the month. Olive-backed Pipits were brief visitors to Buckland, Devon, on 9th and Toab, Shetland, on 17th; however, a bird on Fair Isle on 17th went on to linger into December.

Rather more standard fare for November were Dusky Warblers, and at least eight were reported. One was at Sandgarth, Shetland,





A Great Grey Shrike perches on a high branch at Formby, Lancashire, on 4th. Good numbers of the species were present, typically staking out territories south of the Scottish border, as this BirdGuides.com map shows.



This Cattle Egret lived up to its name at Dengemarsh, Dungeness RSPB, Kent, on 30th, and was one of six logged in Britain and Ireland, markedly down from numbers in the recent past which led to it breeding in Somerset in 2008.

on 9th, with another at the other end of the country on Portland from 12-20th. Suffolk claimed birds at Hollesley Marshes from 15-19th and Landguard from 16-20th; another was at Kelynack Valley, Cornwall, on 16th, lingering into December. Scilly chipped in with birds on St Mary's and Tresco.

Richard's Pipits were fruitful, with numerous sightings of multiple birds including twos at Ryhope, Co Durham, on 9-10th and at Cloughton Wyke, North Yorks, from 24th (following one there since October). Two at Hinkley Point, Somerset, on 29th had become three by the following morning. It's also worth mentioning that the Cambridgeshire bird from October lingered near Fordham until at least 18th.

Great Grey Shrikes were widespread in November, with the vast majority of records concerning regular birds back on familiar winter territories, with sites such as Ashdown Forest, Kent, Thursley Common, Surrey, Roydon Common, Norfolk, Crabtree Hill, Glos, and the New Forest, Hants, featuring prominently on the BirdGuides.com news pages. However, a few records of late migrants included birds at Filey, North Yorks, on 4th, on both Fair Isle and Bressay, Shetland, on 9th and at Rimac, Lincs, on 19th.

On the east coast, one of the highlights of the month was the strongest Little Auk passage witnessed for a few years. The North-East fared best: 2,921 flew past the Farne Islands, Northumberland, on 5th, with 1,376 and 1,162 flying north past Whitburn, Co Durham, on 5th and 6th respectively; at least 1,200 past North Blyth, Northumberland, on 6th was also a great count. Further south, Flamborough Head, East Yorks, did well, with approximately 1,000 past on 5th and more than 720 the following day; 334 also passed Spurn on 5th, but numbers were markedly less in Lincolnshire and Norfolk.

As always with large Little Auk movements, plenty of bizarre behaviour was witnessed, inexplicable to anyone apart from the auks themselves, presumably. Many birds joined Starling flocks, with several heading inland, some resting on coastal pools, one bird flying into a building at Salthouse, Norfolk, and four others there perched in a field; another sat in someone's garden in Holbeach St Marks, Lincs, and, most strikingly, one was well inland at

Angler's CP West Yorks, spending periods hauled out on the bank of the main lake between bouts of swimming, before it was eventually taken into care in the late afternoon. Similarly there were many casualties, and we received several reports of the hapless auks being despatched by Peregrine Falcons and gulls, the predators making the most of this short-lived bounty.

Smaller numbers of Little Auks were reported with some regularity until the end of November, with a significant pulse on 17th (which included 652 past the Farne Islands and more than 200 past Whitburn) coinciding with a good movement of Pomarine Skuas in the North Sea. Totals included an impressive 99 skuas past Hound Point, Lothian, and at least 70 past the Farne Islands. Seawatching was otherwise fairly typical for the season with small numbers of Grey Phalaropes seen and good numbers of both Arctic and Great Skuas lingering late into the month.

### Surfin' birds

One of the most exciting reports of the month concerned the sensational news that the congregation of Surf Scoters in Colwyn Bay, Conwy, had reached nine birds, including seven drakes, on 15th. Though counts failed to reach these heights again by the end of the month, at least six were still there on 1 December. Elsewhere, a youngster alternating between the Suffolk and Essex sides of the Stour Estuary from 5th was a brilliant find, while another popped up on The Fleet near Abbotsbury, Dorset, from 9-13th. The drake remained off Holkham, Norfolk, and the traditional locations of Ruddon's Point, Fife, and Musselburgh, Lothian, also attracted birds, as did Gwynedd and Angus.

Nine American Wigeon included two females on the Gannel Estuary, Cornwall, from 26th and around 20 Green-winged Teal were noted nationwide. Rare in recent years, a female Ferruginous Duck was a great find at Brogborough Lake, Beds, on 11th; it lingered to 20th. In Hampshire, the drake was back at Blashford Lakes on 14th, where it remained until the month's end. At least a dozen Ring-necked Ducks were at Lough Gara, Co Sligo, on 8th and a fourth was in the county at Lough Skean.

The Cattle Egret at Hillsborough, >



Co Down, was still present to at least 21st, with this month marking a three-year anniversary since its initial appearance in the area. Up to three were seen at Dungeness, Kent, throughout the month, and an outstanding congregation of 12 Great Egrets was also recorded there on 26th. The Cheshire Cattle Egret remained throughout, while a bird at Rutland Water on 11th was presumably the same as one at Willow Tree Fen, Lincs, on 28-29th.

### Iberians head north

Glossy Ibises were restricted to birds in Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, Essex and Co Waterford, while a juvenile Purple Heron near Capel Gwyn, Anglesey, from 18-25th was not only late but also confiding, proving popular over its week-long stay.



KRIS WEBB

Scilly boasted two Ring-billed Gulls during the month, but only this first-winter on St Mary's hung around, remaining loyal to the airport from 9-23 November. It was a quiet month for the species, which barely hit double figures, and most were in Ireland.

**Inset:** still in residence from October, the Lesser Yellowlegs at Rogerstown NR, on the Rogerstown Estuary, Co Dublin, was a reliable sight from the North Hide until 16th, when it finally moved on.



Rough-legged Buzzards were unsurprisingly plentiful during November after October's influx, and 344 reports were disseminated on BirdGuides.com news services throughout the month. It was the bird at Grindale, East Yorks, that proved the standout individual – taking 'confiding' to new levels, it regularly showed to within metres for much of the month. Traditionally an east-coast species, it was nice to see records coming from as far west as the Isle of Arran, Ayrshire, on 26th and Menck Pass, Dumfries and Galloway, from 7th.

Further south, at least three birds remained on the moors between Sheffield and Manchester, while inland records from Braughing, Herts, and Jevington, East Sussex, also pleased the crowds. Several remained in Norfolk, with up to three reported from the marshes around Breydon Water and another two at Burnham Overy. ■

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**BIRDBUIDES**



JOHN NADIN. ABOVE: PAUL AND ANDREA KELLY (WWW.IRISHBIRDMAGAZINE.COM)

Not two species usually associated with each other, this drake Green-winged Teal (centre left) mingled with commoner waterbirds at Vane Farm RSPB, Perth and Kinross, from 22-28th, including a Water Rail (centre right). From Kent to Orkney and into Ireland, there were about 20 Green-winged Teal during the month, but no birder has yet had the skill and luck to identify the first female for Britain and Ireland, though logic says there must be plenty out there.



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Western Palearctic: November 2014

# The Desert comes to the Dutch

Despite being suppressed at first, an out-of-place African warbler finally gave itself up in The Netherlands, writes *Josh Jones*.

An African Desert Warbler was a completely unexpected find inland at Alphen aan den Rijn, The Netherlands, on 12th, and finally gave itself up to the masses when refound on 26th.

The most sensational record of the month (and possibly even the year) was the African Desert Warbler present on a polder near Alphen aan den Rijn, Zuid-Holland, The Netherlands, from 12-30th. The bird was initially suppressed due to access restrictions, but happily

for Dutch listers was twitchable for the final five days of its stay.

November produced two American Purple Gallinules: the first was an apparently healthy bird at Barragem de Faveta, Santiago, Cape Verde, on 4th, but wasn't seen again. Shortly afterwards, the first American Purple Gallinule for Morocco was found in a garden in Kenitra on 17th but again quickly disappeared.

Another short-stayer was the country's second Great Knot, photographed at Oued Souss with a small party of

Knot on 8th. Cape Verde also held three Intermediate Egrets at the regular site at Barragem de Poilão, Santiago, on 3rd.

Azorean records include the Willet still at Ponta Delgada ETAR, São Miguel, throughout; Great Blue Herons on São Miguel and Terceira; Pied-billed Grebes on São Miguel and Faial; and American Coots on Pico and Terceira. Meanwhile, on the Portuguese mainland a stunning adult Ivory Gull showed well around Nazaré harbour for four days from 16th.

Spain's fifth Killdeer showed well at Cabo Udra, Galicia, on 13-14th. Also in the region was a Solitary Sandpiper at Cecebre

Reservoir – the second Spanish occurrence. On the opposite side of the country, Spain's third Blyth's Reed Warbler was at the Llobregat Delta, near Barcelona, on 9th. An as-yet non-specific female Boat-tailed or Great-tailed Grackle was photographed at Europe Point, Gibraltar, on 11th but no doubt arrived courtesy of a ship.

A first-winter Lesser Crested Tern at Tarnos, Landes, France, from 22-26th was not only very late but a significant Atlantic coast record.

Belated news broke in the month of Italy's first Pied Kingfisher near Ugento, Apulia, the bird having been seen and

Though difficult to pick out in flight by its slightly paler underwing, a first-winter Great Knot (second from right) was a fantastic find at Oued Souss, Morocco, associating with its far commoner congener, Knot. Rare enough in the rest of the region, the bird will be just the second for North Africa, if accepted; the last was discovered at the same site in August 1980.

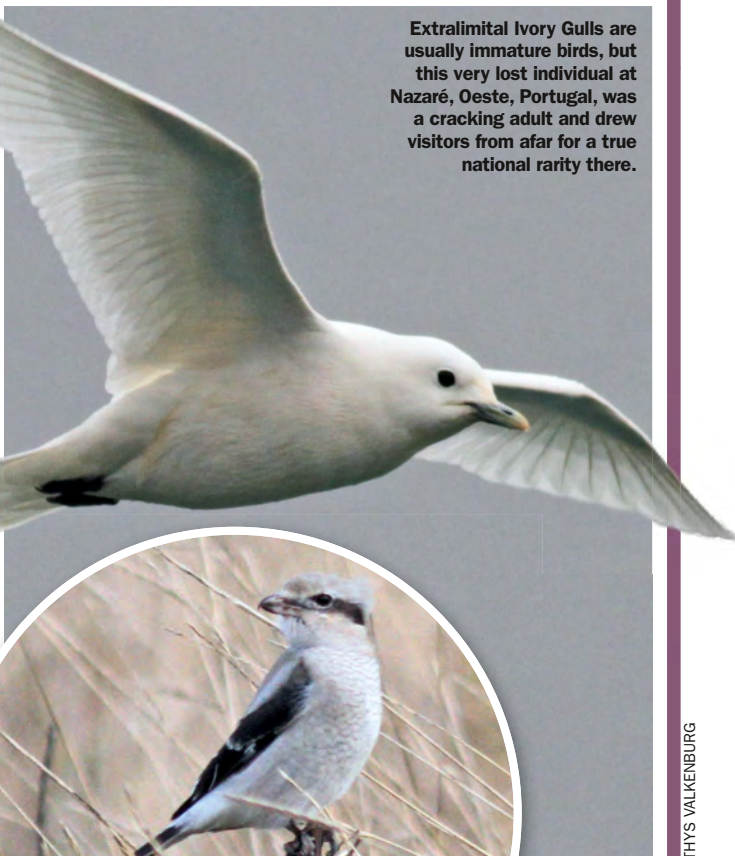
**Inset:** the diagnostic blackish breast patch and flank markings were far easier to see 'on the deck', along with its more robust structure.







This Ashy Drongo at Gan Shmuel in the Hefer Valley, Israel, on 3 December will be the country's first if accepted.



Extralimital Ivory Gulls are usually immature birds, but this very lost individual at Nazaré, Oeste, Portugal, was a cracking adult and drew visitors from afar for a true national rarity there.



This first-winter grey shrike on Sääpi island, Finland, on 17th was strongly suspected of being a Northern Grey Shrike of the form *sibiricus*, a hotly tipped split from Great Grey. Strong indicators of its identity are the brown-washed, strongly scaled underparts, and the fact that it showed a pure white rump in flight.

photographed on 5th. Also in the country, the Grey-headed Gull returned to the coast north of Bari, being seen at Bisceglie on 28th, while further north there was a report of a Brown Booby at Porto Corsini, Emilia-Romagna, on 3rd.

After attracting Turkey's first Black-throated Accentor on 31 October, the Kizilirmak Delta registered the nation's fourth Lapland Bunting on 3rd and Pallas's Warbler on 6th. Israel's first Lesser White-fronted Goose since 1993 (and fourth ever) was in the Jizreel Valley from 10th, while a Lesser Flamingo at KM20 salt pans, Eilat, on 16th was only Israel's second.

After October's *borealis* Great ('Northern') Grey Shrike on Corvo (see last month's *Birdwatch*, page 22), a *sibiricus*-type was discovered in Finland at Sääpi, Luvia, on 17th – this subspecies must be a candidate for vagrancy to Britain one day. A late Brown Shrike was at Selje, Nordfjord, Norway, on 26th, while Sweden's fourth Lesser Short-toed Lark was at Luleå, Norrbotten, on 29th. A drake American Black Duck in Skåne on 9th was a great Scandinavian record, while a Spotted Sandpiper at Rinkaby is only Sweden's eighth. What



This first-winter Black-faced Bunting was on Heligoland, Germany, from 28th. With just five British records between 1994 and 2004, this bird excited conjecture that we might yet see the species again here.

could be last year's Steller's Sea Eagle of unknown origin was on Öland, Sweden, on 12th.

A Grey-cheeked Thrush frequented Hvolsvöllur, South, Iceland, on 2-3rd, with the drake Hooded Merganser returning to Hrauntúnstjörn Lake near Reykjavík, now in stunning adult plumage. Also returning was the drake American White-winged Scoter to Reykjavík harbour.

A Black-faced Bunting arrived on Heligoland, Germany, on 29th and lingered into December – remarkably, it is the fourth record for the island. A late Black-winged Pratincole showed well in fields near Overijse, Flemish Brabant, Belgium, from 29th, and represents just the third for the country. Polish records included the returning adult Ring-billed Gull at Ostroda on 22nd, this bird having been ringed in West Pomerania in 2005; White-headed Duck and Sociable Lapwing were also seen in November. ■



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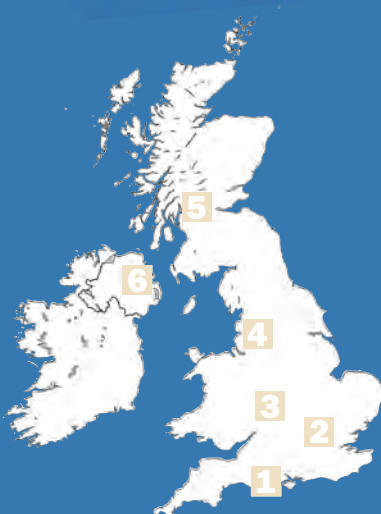


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## Where to watch birds



- 1** Weymouth, Dorset. Pages 25-27
- 2** Stocker's Lake and Maple Lodge, Hertfordshire. Page 28
- 3** Worcester and Upton Warren, Worcestershire. Page 29
- 4** Wigan Flashes, Lancashire. Page 30
- 5** Baron's Haugh, North Lanarkshire. Page 31
- 6** Belfast Lough, Co Antrim. Page 32

### MORE JANUARY SITES

- Abberton, Essex: [bit.ly/bw222Abberton](http://bit.ly/bw222Abberton)
- Conder Green, Lancashire: [bit.ly/bw210Conder](http://bit.ly/bw210Conder)
- Dee Estuary, Cheshire: [bit.ly/bw246DeeEstuary](http://bit.ly/bw246DeeEstuary)
- Dorset: [bit.ly/bw259Dorset](http://bit.ly/bw259Dorset)
- Donegal Bay, Co Donegal: [bit.ly/bw234Donegal](http://bit.ly/bw234Donegal)
- East Fife: [bit.ly/bw222Fife](http://bit.ly/bw222Fife)
- Findhorn and Burghead Bays, Moray and Nairn: [bit.ly/bw234Findhorn](http://bit.ly/bw234Findhorn)
- The east Lothian coast: [bit.ly/bw259EastLothianCoast](http://bit.ly/bw259EastLothianCoast)
- Islay, Argyll: [bit.ly/bw222Islay](http://bit.ly/bw222Islay)
- Lancashire: [bit.ly/bw259Lancashire](http://bit.ly/bw259Lancashire)
- Llangorse Lake, Powys: [bit.ly/bw210Llangorse](http://bit.ly/bw210Llangorse)
- North Norfolk: [bit.ly/bw259NorthNorfolk](http://bit.ly/bw259NorthNorfolk)
- Stour Valley and Reculver, Kent: [bit.ly/bw259StourValleyReculver](http://bit.ly/bw259StourValleyReculver)



# 1 SITE OF THE MONTH WEYMOUTH

This seaside town in Dorset boasts two excellent RSPB reserves, making it one of Britain's best built-up birding destinations, says **Peter Moore**.

The elusive Bittern is a winter visitor to both sites.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

When the 2012 Olympic sailing events came to Weymouth the area benefited from significant investment in green spaces, further improving facilities for visiting birders and underlining its status as one of Britain's top urban destinations for birding. The town's flagship RSPB reserves – Radipole Lake and Lodmoor – are known collectively as 'Weymouth Wetlands'. There is a history of rare birds going missing from one only to be relocated at the other.

The main targets, **Cetti's Warbler** and **Bearded Tit**, can be found at

both reserves all year round, and while a **Bittern** boomed in spring 2014 at Lodmoor, it is more typically a winter visitor at both sites, seen mostly towards dusk. **Spoonbill** and **Marsh Harrier** are possible at either reserve, while further interest is provided by gulls, ducks and waders.

### Lake district

Radipole Lake lies in Weymouth's urban centre. Once the estuary of the River Wey, it now consists of a shallow lagoon with extensive reedbeds, scrub-fringed paths and, to the north, rough

### USEFUL CONTACTS

#### Travel information and timetables

- **Traveline:** 0871 200 2233 or [www.traveline.info](http://www.traveline.info).
- **Traveline Scotland:** 0871 200 2233 or [www.travelinescotland.com](http://www.travelinescotland.com).
- **Traveline Cymru:** 0871 200 2233 or [www.traveline-cymru.info](http://www.traveline-cymru.info)

- **Stagecoach Bus:** [www.stagecoachbus.com](http://www.stagecoachbus.com).
- **Arriva Bus:** 0844 800 4411 or [www.arrivabus.co.uk](http://www.arrivabus.co.uk).
- **National Rail:** 0845 748 4950 or [www.nationalrail.com](http://www.nationalrail.com).

**National bird news**  
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and to report your own sightings, call 0333 577 2473, email [sightings@birdguides.com](mailto:sightings@birdguides.com) or visit [www.birdguides.com](http://www.birdguides.com).

#### Mapping

Access fully interactive and annotated Google maps for all these itineraries at [bit.ly/BWMaps](http://bit.ly/BWMaps).

#### Further information

- **County bird recorders:** [www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/bird-recording/county-bird-recorders](http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/birdtrack/bird-recording/county-bird-recorders).
- **Birdwatch Bookshop:** for discounted birding books see [www.birdwatch.co.uk/store](http://www.birdwatch.co.uk/store).





A winter flock of gulls forms at the Discovery Centre at Radipole Lake RSPB; check for Mediterranean Gull (above). Cetti's Warbler (right) is a main target, though is often heard rather than seen.

meadows and more scrub. Radipole lays claim to an impressive list of rarities including Pied-billed Grebe and Laughing, Bonaparte's and Franklin's Gulls. Glossy Ibis has also appeared here and on the football field at nearby Radipole Park Drive.

Lodmoor is an edge-of-town reserve, a walkable mile north-east of Weymouth

town centre. Grazing marsh, reedbeds, scrub and pools create a mosaic of habitats. The site also boasts a first class rarity list – Short-billed and Long-billed Dowitchers, Wilson's Phalarope and Sociable Lapwing to name a few. A several thousand-strong **Starling** flock entertained visitors at dusk earlier this winter.

**Despite its urban location, Radipole Lake RSPB is an excellent birding destination.**

Access is straightforward at both sites. A half-mile linear route provides access to Radipole Lake, while a 1.5-mile circular walk takes in most of Lodmoor. If you are planning a full day and can wait until lunchtime before needing the facilities at Radipole, start at Lodmoor. While early morning is best, one of the benefits of both reserves is that many birds are used to people, so any time of day can be fruitful. But for pre-roosting gulls, ending the day at Radipole is recommended.

### On song

For Lodmoor RSPB, follow the A353 towards Wareham from Weymouth seafront. Park at the Beach Car Park, start at the main entrance (SY 688809) **1** and turn left just after the entrance







sign (SY 689809). Take the path up the western edge of the reserve, listening for Cetti's Warbler in the ditches to the left. Waders and sometimes a Spoonbill may be in the pools on the right.

When you reach the reedbed on your right start listening for the 'pinging' calls of Bearded Tit. Turn right at the T-junction (SY 684815) ② and follow the path through the reedbed, keeping right until you rise slightly into residential Southdown Avenue.

Walk east along the avenue, with the reserve on your right, using the higher vantage point to look out for Bittern. Some of the 300-strong **Common Pochard** flock which the reserve hosts in winter may be seen from here, along with commoner ducks and possibly **Greater Scaup**.

Turn south at SY 690817 ③ into Beachdown Way, a wide path through the reserve which is good for Cetti's Warbler, towards the coast. The hump at the seaward end of Beachdown Way may produce **Water Pipit**. At the end of the lane turn right and continue walking parallel to the coast road to a viewing shelter; scan from here for waders, gulls and raptors. Soon after, cross over a channel and return to your starting point. Be sure to check Weymouth Bay for divers and seaduck before leaving.

### Loop the loop

Radipole Lake RSPB is well signposted from Weymouth town centre – follow the brown tourist signs. The site is one of the best places in Britain to see and hear Cetti's Warbler at any time of year. Start at the thatched Discovery Centre (SY 676796) ④ in the Swannery Car Park. The long-staying, presumed escaped **Hooded Merganser** may



PETER MOORE

Both sites have an enviable list of rarities, with this juvenile Short-billed Dowitcher at Lodmoor in autumn 2012 demonstrating the potential of the site.

be found here and **Water Rail** can be seen around the base of the centre. Bearded Tit can be seen anywhere in the reedbeds, but the path north from the centre, over the footbridge to the Buddleia Loop, is as good a place as any.

Enter the Buddleia Loop, which is reliable for Cetti's, at SY 675799 ⑤ and continue anti-clockwise. Pause at the viewing shelter overlooking open water favoured by grebes and gulls before continuing to rejoin the main path. On doing so head north-west to the North Hide at the top of the reserve (SY 671804) ⑥. A large wader scrape

has recently been created in this area. Scan the reedbeds for Bearded Tit and maybe a Bittern in flight from one of several viewing platforms, and look out for **Kingfisher** and **Water Rail** in the channels.

Retrace your steps, cutting out the Buddleia Loop, for refreshments at the Discovery Centre and to check the gulls. Birds gather in the car park and in front of the Discovery Centre in late afternoon and the flocks can feature many **Mediterranean Gulls**, plus a chance of **Iceland**, **Yellow-legged** and even **Ring-billed**. ■



## VISITOR INFORMATION

### READS

• **Where to Watch Birds in Dorset, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight** by Martin Cade and George Green (fourth edition, Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77.

• **Best Birdwatching Sites in Dorset** by Neil Gartshore (Buckingham Press, £17.95) – order from £16.95 on page 77.

### > Sites and access

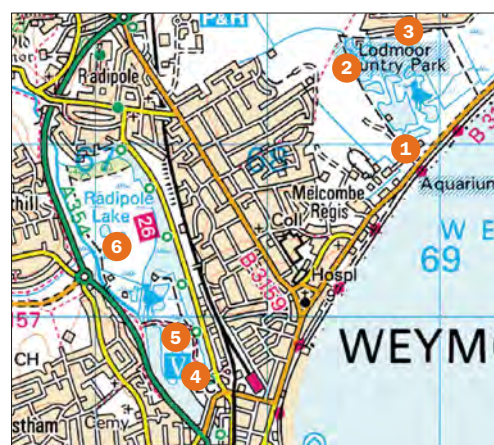
Access to both reserves is free of charge, though car parking charges apply. Disabled access is good at both reserves with a network of wide, firm and flat paths. The Discovery Centre and North Hide at Radipole Lake are wheelchair accessible. Both reserves are on Route 26 of the National Cycle Network. The nearest train station is in Weymouth, and First Group runs local bus services (tel 0870 010 6022 or visit [www.firstgroup.com/ukbus/dorset](http://www.firstgroup.com/ukbus/dorset)).

### > Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer OL15 and Landranger 194.

### > Web resources

- [www.dorsetbirds.org.uk](http://www.dorsetbirds.org.uk) for Dorset Bird Club, with recent sightings and local site information.
- [www.rspb.org.uk/radipolelake](http://www.rspb.org.uk/radipolelake) for Radipole Lake RSPB, with a downloadable map and latest sightings.
- [www.rspb.org.uk/lodmoor](http://www.rspb.org.uk/lodmoor) for Lodmoor RSPB, with a downloadable map and latest sightings.



See [bit.ly/BWMaps](http://bit.ly/BWMaps) for links to the fully annotated Google maps.





# 2

## STOCKER'S LAKE AND MAPLE LODGE NR

By Steve Carter

### Where and why

Stocker's Lake, a Site of Special Scientific Interest, occupies a large mature gravel pit between Rickmansworth and Mill End in Hertfordshire. By 1967 the flooded pit had become noted for its fish stocks, especially Carp and Pike, at which time it was leased to the London Anglers Association. The lake now shares its facilities with anglers and non-fishing folk. Since the Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust and Friends of Stocker's Lake have been involved with the site, it has become a superb area for birding.

Maple Lodge NR is 40 acres of mixed habitat based around two disused gravel pits; it is owned by Thames Water and leased to Maple Lodge Conservation Society.

### Route planner

Access to Stocker's Lake (TQ 049939) is via the A404 from Rickmansworth. From Church Street, take Harefield Road and then turn right into Frogmoor Lane. Take another right over the canal bridge and park in the Aquadrome car park **1**.

Wildfowl are the main winter objective due to the large expanse of water, and many species of duck gather. It is possible to observe great rafts of **Tufted Duck**, **Common Pochard**, **Eurasian Wigeon** and the highly gregarious **Northern Shoveler**, whose spatulate bills filter the surface of the lake as they feed while swimming in circles. As the season progresses, look out for the many **Canada** and

Wildfowl are the main target at Stocker's Lake in January. Look out for the regularly wintering Smew.

TONY COOMBS (WWW.WINGSANDTHINGS PHOTOGRAPHY.CO.UK)



smaller number of **Greylag Geese** roosting on the islands.

However, the jewel in the Stocker's Lake crown is the enigmatic **Smew**, a scarce duck that visits Britain in the colder months. It drifts around seemingly aimlessly, the males (or 'white nuns') wearing the trademark 'habit' of black and white, the females with their characteristic red heads competing for morsels and small fish such as Perch.

There are regular **Lesser Redpoll** and **Siskin** flocks, with the odd **Mealy Redpoll** sometimes seen. **Common Goldeneye** is the most numerous scarce diving

duck, while the presence of small numbers of **Goosander** is related to the harshness of winter in the valley. Look out, too, for the occasional **Bittern**. **Siberian Chiffchaff** is a possibility in trees along the Colne. Up to 20 **Little Egrets** can be seen roosting at Stocker's Lake.

Maple Lodge **2** NR is situated a short drive from Stocker's Lake on the A412. It's a great place to see **Kingfisher** at close quarters. A feeding station is in operation most of the year and yields the odd **Marsh Tit**, as well as Fox and Muntjac Deer. Large tit flocks form to forage for food, while finches should include **Siskin** and

**Lesser Redpoll**; winter thrushes are regular, with flocks of up to 250 **Redwing** and 400 **Fieldfare**. **Great Spotted Woodpecker** should be seen, and if you're lucky **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** is also possible. Check the flower meadow for **Barn Owl** which is sometimes present.

**Water Rail** is regular, and **Bittern** and **Common Snipe** are possible. **Waxwings** have been seen in some winters. Numbers of **Northern Lapwing** and **European Golden Plover** attract the occasional **Peregrine Falcon**. **Yellowhammer** and **Corn Bunting** can sometimes be found among the **Skylark** flocks. ■



## VISITOR INFORMATION

### READS



**Where to Watch Birds in Britain** by Simon Harrap and Nigel Redman (second edition, Christopher Helm, £19.99) – order for £18.99 on page 77.

### Sites and access

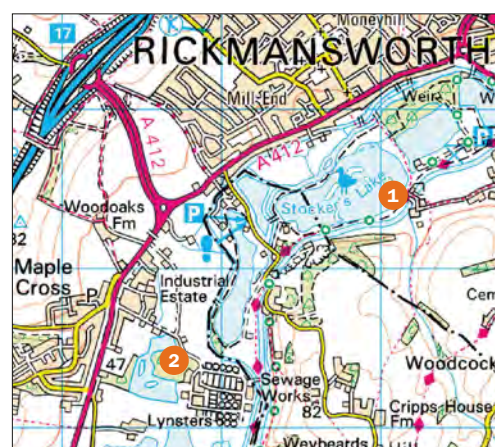
There is free access to Stocker's Lake. Access to Maple Lodge NR is restricted to members only; membership costs £17 (email sue@maplelodge.org for details). Car parking charges may apply. The nearest train station is at Rickmansworth. Arriva Bus runs a service between the station and Stocker's Lake; call 0344 800 4411 or see [www.arrivabus.co.uk](http://www.arrivabus.co.uk) for details. There are wheelchair accessible paths at both sites and hides at Maple Lodge.

### Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 172 and Landranger 165.

### Web resources

- [www.hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/stockers-lake](http://www.hertswildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/stockers-lake) for more information about the reserve.
- [www.maplelodge.org](http://www.maplelodge.org) for information about Maple Lodge NR.
- [www.colnevalleybirding.co.uk](http://www.colnevalleybirding.co.uk) for information on birding in the area.

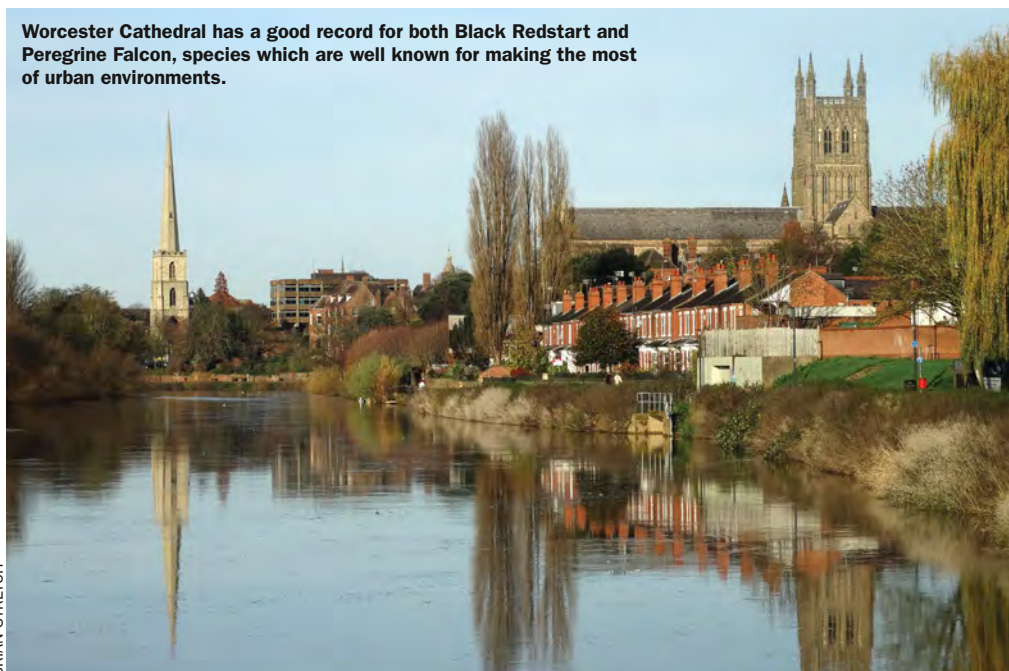


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Worcester Cathedral has a good record for both **Black Redstart** and **Peregrine Falcon**, species which are well known for making the most of urban environments.



BRIAN STRETCH

## Where and why

The River Sever meanders through Worcester and is bordered by nature reserves, a sewage treatment works, parkland and a racecourse where a good range of species can be seen. The Worcestershire Wildlife Trust's reserve at Upton Warren attracts a wide range of waterbirds, viewable at relatively close quarters.

## Route planner

A winter walk along the River Sever in Worcester can act as a magnet for waterbirds, when local lakes and gravel pits freeze over. Park along Weir Lane (SO 843530) **1** and follow the footpath towards the river. As

you approach the river check the trees along the perimeter of the sewage treatment works for **Goldcrest** and **Common Chiffchaff**; a **Firecrest** was reported here a few years ago.

Continue towards Diglis Bridge, scanning the river for regular **Goosander**, occasional **Common Goldeneye**, **Gadwall** and **Eurasian Teal**, while **Water Rail**, **Common Snipe** and **Kingfisher** may also be present. From here it is worth taking a short detour to explore the adjacent Cherry Orchard LNR (SO 849531) **2**. This former landfill site provides a mosaic of habitats where **Woodcock** and **European Stonechat** are possible and **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** has occurred in the past.

Returning to the river, turn right and continue north past the locks and over the footbridge that spans Diglis Dock **3**. From here, head upstream towards the centre of Worcester. Further **Goosanders** may be present, while this section of the river has in the past attracted **Red-necked Grebe**, **Shag**, **Common Eider**, **Red-breasted Merganser**, **Greater Scaup**, **Red-crested Pochard** and **Whooper Swan** – ably demonstrating how productive the area can be.

Continuing north, Worcester Cathedral (SO 849544) **4** will loom into view; this enormous building has a good track record for attracting **Black Redstart**. A bird is present at the time of

writing and will hopefully continue to remain in residence for the rest of the winter;

**Peregrine Falcons** are almost guaranteed here or on nearby St Andrew's Spire.

At this point either retrace your steps or, if time allows, head back towards the river and continue north to Worcester Racecourse at Pitchcroft (SO 841554) **5**. This area is prone to flooding, and as the water recedes it can be attractive to large numbers of gulls, with recent records of **Iceland**, **Mediterranean** and **Great Black-backed Gulls** among the commoner species.

Eleven miles to the north-east of the city is Upton Warren NR. The Moors Pool is generally the most productive area during the winter months (SO 938675) **6**. There are three hides to choose from and a good selection of wildfowl will be present including **Common Pochard**, **Gadwall**, **Northern Shoveler** and **Eurasian Wigeon**, while the occasional **Shelduck**, **Common Goldeneye** or **Goosander** may also be there.

Carefully scan the Common Snipe flocks for **Jack Snipe**, while one or two wintering **Green Sandpipers** may be present. The alders surrounding the pool attract small numbers of **Siskin** and **Lesser Redpoll**, along with the occasional **Mealy Redpoll**. **Cetti's Warblers** have made a welcome return after several recent harsh winters, but **Bitterns** have become less predictable, although a scan of the reedbeds at dusk will provide the best chance of ending the day on a high. ■



## VISITOR INFORMATION

### READS



**Where to Watch Birds in the West Midlands** by Frank Gribble, Graham Harrison, Helen Griffiths, Jim Winsper and Steve Coney (third edition, Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order from £16.99 on page 77.

### Sites and access

Upton Warren NR is open dawn to dusk. Wildlife Trust members must carry their membership cards and non-members must obtain a permit (£3) from the Trust offices at Smite or from wardens on site. The nearest train stations are at Bromsgrove or Droitwich, while the 144 Worcester to Birmingham bus service passes the entrance to Upton Warren (call First Group on 0845 602 0121 or visit [www.firstgroup.com/ukbus/worcestershire\\_herefordshire](http://www.firstgroup.com/ukbus/worcestershire_herefordshire)). The riverside public footpaths are paved and paths at Upton Warren are reasonably flat, with one wheelchair accessible hide.

### Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 141 and 155 and Landranger 172.

### Web resources

- [www.worcester.gov.uk/cherry-orchard-local-nature-reserve](http://www.worcester.gov.uk/cherry-orchard-local-nature-reserve) for information on Cherry Orchard.
- [www.wildlifetrusts.org/reserves/upton-warren](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/reserves/upton-warren) for Upton Warren.
- [www.worcesterbirding.co.uk](http://www.worcesterbirding.co.uk) for local bird news and sightings.



See [bit.ly/BWMaps](http://bit.ly/BWMaps) for links to fully annotated Google maps





# 4

## WIGAN FLASHES

By Mark Champion

### Where and why

A mile south of Wigan town centre, Wigan Flashes LNR is a legacy of the area's industrial past. Its eight water bodies were formed when the land subsided after mining in the area ended. Since then the flashes have developed extensive reedbeds and fens, as well as other important habitats including grasslands and wet woodlands. Much of the site is designated as an SSSI and is part of the much larger Greenheart Regional Park. A visitor can be sure of seeing a good range of wildfowl over the winter period.

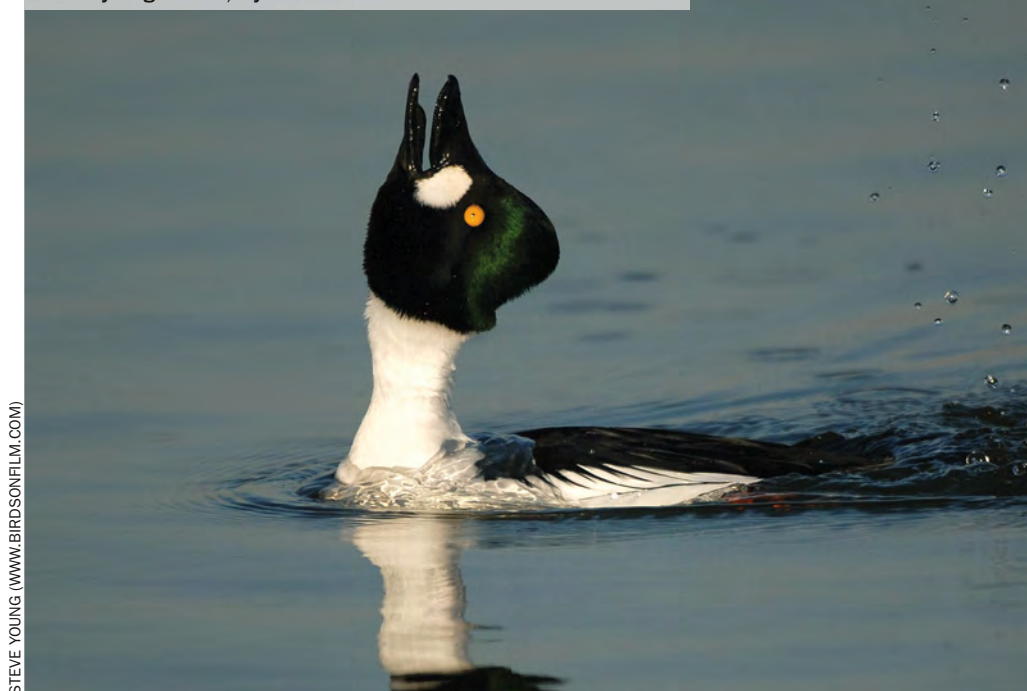
### Route planner

Wigan Flashes (SD 585030) is easily located from junction 25 of the M6, turning left at the end of the spur road onto the A49 past the supermarket. Turn right at the roundabout and follow the B5238 (Poolstock Lane) for about a mile; the car park is on the right-hand side of the road and is signposted.

Parking at the Poolstock car park, walk eastwards towards the canal; this provides views across Scotsman's Flash ①, where there are usually good numbers of wildfowl, including **Gadwall**, **Common Goldeneye**, **Common Pochard**, **Northern Shoveler** and **Eurasian Teal**; however, the local sailing club uses this water, and if the boats are out the birds cross the canal and use Pearson's Flash.

Scotsman's Flash is one of the best places to see the occasional rarer duck, and **Common Scoter** has appeared there this year.

With its smart black-and-white plumage, a drake **Common Goldeneye** is always a good find; try Scotsman's Flash for this attractive duck.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

Scan for scarcer gulls in the evening roost, as both **Glaucous** and **Iceland Gulls** are seen occasionally.

On arriving at the canal, look out for **Kingfisher**, then turn right and walk to Moss Bridge ②. The bridge is the centrepiece of Wigan Flashes and is one of the best locations to see a wintering **Bittern** as it flies overhead, moving between the reedbeds – around 3 pm in the winter on a clear frosty day can be particularly productive.

The birches and alders on the low hill to the east of the canal are a good place to look

for winter finches and thrushes. This is the area where the **Lesser Redpoll** flocks spend the majority of their time, so is worth exploring; these usually contain a small number of **Mealy Redpolls**, so it is always worth checking them thoroughly.

The path towards the local school takes the visitor to the feeding station ③, where **Willow Tit** is a highlight, but also look out for finches and **Water Rail**. This path is a good place to hear and hopefully see **Cetti's Warbler**.

Continue to follow the canal, and the stoned path will take you to Bryn Marsh ④, where the

most extensive reedbed is found. This is a good opportunity to look for **Bittern**, or to see various raptors flying over the area. This winter these have included **Peregrine Falcon**, **Marsh Harrier** and **Merlin**.

A circular walk can be created by returning along the woodland ride towards the feeding station and then back via Moss Bridge. This time cross the bridge and walk back on the canal overlooking Pearson's Flash ⑤, which is well known for its diving ducks and **Gadwall** numbers. Just after the smaller Westwood Flash cross the canal and return to the car park.



## VISITOR INFORMATION

### READS



**Where to Watch Birds in Britain** by Simon Harrap and Nigel Redman (second edition, Christopher Helm, £19.99) – order for £18.99 on page 77.

### Sites and access

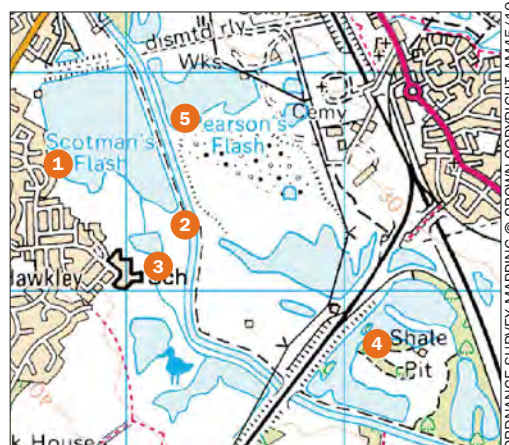
The site is open access and there are no restrictions. The nearest train stations are at Wigan. Stagecoach Wigan runs the 610 bus service, which stops close to the reserve entrance. Access for wheelchairs and mobility scooters in some areas can be difficult due to slopes and uneven paths; the return loop is currently inaccessible to wheelchairs although work is ongoing to remedy this – call 01942 726214 for further details.

### Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 276 and Landranger 108.

### Web resources

- [www.wiganflashes.org/web](http://www.wiganflashes.org/web) for sightings, news and information on Wigan Flashes.
- [www.wildlifetrusts.org/reserves/wigan-flashes-local-nature-reserve](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/reserves/wigan-flashes-local-nature-reserve) for further information on visiting Wigan Flashes.
- [www.lancasterbirdwatching.org.uk](http://www.lancasterbirdwatching.org.uk) for the Lancaster and District Birdwatching Society.



See [bit.ly/BWMaps](http://bit.ly/BWMaps) for links to fully annotated Google maps

ORDNANCE SURVEY MAPPING © CROWN COPYRIGHT. AM45/10



## 5 BARON'S HAUGH

By Stephen Owen

### Where and why

Baron's Haugh RSPB and the neighbouring Dalzell Estate are located on the very edge of Motherwell, North Lanarkshire, and extend from the town to a section of the River Clyde. The centrepiece of the reserve is an area of wetlands in the Clyde Valley floodplain. This is home to considerable numbers of overwintering wildfowl, as well as waders on autumn passage. Elsewhere, the reserve is a varied mix of open grassland, scrub, parkland and woods, and supports an interesting mix of woodland birds.

### Route planner

There are various access points to the reserve; this route is described from the main reserve car park at the end of Manse Road (NS 755552) **1**. From here, walk out of the car park the way you came in, turn right and then right again, and pass through a metal gate into part of the old estate parkland. Listen and look for woodland birds such as tits, **Great Spotted Woodpecker** and **Nuthatch**.

Continuing on, once the path has levelled off, take a left to the Marsh Hide, scanning for wildfowl such as **Eurasian Teal** in the open water and reedy fringes. **Green Sandpipers** often frequent this area in winter. **Water Rail** is often heard and occasionally seen in among the wet woods and marshy vegetation around the hide. It is also worth searching across the marsh and wet grassland for families of grazing Roe Deer.

Scan the open water from Marsh Hide for the possibility of **Green Sandpiper**.



MARIANNE TAYLOR

Retracing your steps, continue in the same direction as before. Grassy fields rise up on your right. Look out for **Common Buzzard**, **Kestrel**, **Jay** and **Raven** over the fields and flocks of winter thrushes in among the hedgerows.

Take another short detour to the Causeway Hide, where you should see greater numbers of wildfowl such as **Eurasian Teal**, **Eurasian Wigeon**, **Northern**

**Shoveler**, **Common Goldeneye** and **Whooper Swan**.

Continuing in the same direction as before, take the left branch of the track to the banks of the River Clyde, turning left and heading upstream. As you walk along the river look out for **Goosander**, **Common Goldeneye** and, with luck, a **Kingfisher** or **Otter**.

The track passes the Phoenix Hide **2** for more wildfowl views.

**Little Grebe** is often to be seen feeding around this side of the wetland.

As you continue along the river, look out for flocks of **Fieldfares**, **Redwings** and **Long-tailed Tits** in among the scrub. The Centenary Hide is a short side trip up some steep steps, again affording more views across the wetlands and another chance to spot **Green Sandpiper**. **Common** and **Jack Snipes** are in the wet grassland in winter, but can be very challenging the see.

Continuing along the River Clyde, pass the end of the chestnut walk and go through a metal gate into an area of parkland **3**. This section of the river can be good for **Kingfisher** and **Grey Wagtail**. Listen out for **Jays** calling as they fly between the old parkland trees.

At the end of the parkland, take the gate on the left, up through the trees, away from the river and into the Adder's Gill woodland. Again this can be a good area to find **Nuthatch**, as well as **Coal Tit** and **Goldcrest** high in the trees.

At the top of the hill, take the left fork and pass through the woods of Dalzell Estate **4**. The views extend back over the parkland and down to the river. Again these woods are home to **Nuthatch**, thrushes, **Great Spotted Woodpecker** and a variety of other woodland birds. At the end of this path, take some steps down to the Dalzell Burn, crossing by a small stone bridge. Continue on, turning right around the walls of an old graveyard, before heading up the hill back to the car park. ■

## i VISITOR INFORMATION

### READS



**Where to Watch Birds in Britain** by Simon Harrap and Nigel Redman (second edition, Christopher Helm, £19.99) – order for £18.99 on page 77.

### > Sites and access

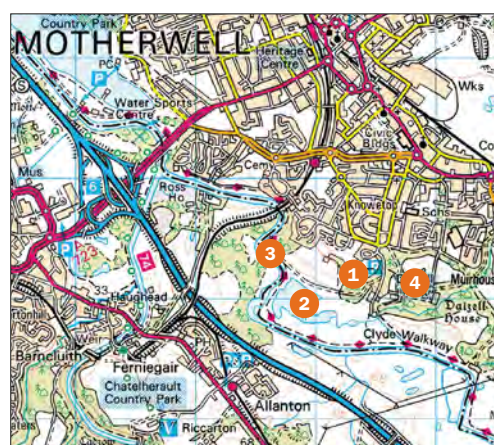
The nature reserve is open at all hours. There are no entrance fees and the car park is free. The main car park is at the end of Manse Road (ML1 2SG). The nearest train station is at Motherwell. Buses from Motherwell town centre pass nearby at Adele Street. See [www.travelinescotland.com](http://www.travelinescotland.com) for more information. The entire route is not currently accessible by wheelchair due to flood damage to the Clyde Walkway. Marsh and Causeway Hides can be accessed fairly easily from the car park, although it may be preferable to take the track down from the far end of the car park.

### > Maps

Ordnance Survey Explorer 343 and Landranger 64.

### > Web resources

- [www.rspb.org.uk/baronshaugh](http://www.rspb.org.uk/baronshaugh) for more information on the RSPB reserve.
- [www.dalzellandbaronshaugh.co.uk](http://www.dalzellandbaronshaugh.co.uk) for further information on both reserves.



See [bit.ly/BWMaps](http://bit.ly/BWMaps) for links to fully annotated Google maps





# 6

## INNER BELFAST LOUGH

By Wilton Farrelly

### Where and why

This itinerary takes in a short but easily accessible circuit around Belfast, with a particular focus on habitats around the inner parts of Belfast Lough. It can be started at either end, depending on the time of day and tides. Birds to be seen are typical of those in winter in Northern Ireland, with an emphasis on wildfowl and gulls. Rarities in recent years have included Cattle Egret, Black Brant and Green-winged Teal.

### Route planner

From Belfast city centre follow signs for the A2. Leave this road between Belfast and Bangor and take the entrance to Belfast Harbour Estate. Start at Macedon Point at Hazelbank Park **1**.

From the lookout scan the lough for **Common Eider** (Belfast Lough has the highest counts in Ireland), **Greater Scaup**, **Red-throated Diver**, wintering auks, **Red-breasted Merganser** and grebes. There is an outside chance of **Common** or **Velvet Scoter** and perhaps a **Long-tailed Duck**, although further north at Carrickfergus is a more reliable site for this species. Hazelbank Park is excellent for

winter thrushes.

Moving towards Belfast city, Whitehouse Lagoon **2** is an excellent tidal site. From the car park search through the **Common Redshank** for wintering **Spotted Redshank**. You should also see **Black-tailed Godwit** and **Knot**, as well as other wintering waders such as **Northern Lapwing** and **Turnstone**.

Gulls will be numerous, bathing and drinking around the river, and **Mediterranean Gull** is a strong possibility. **Lesser Black-backed Gulls** increasingly overwinter and this is a good site for them at this time of year. You also stand a good chance of a **Glaucous** or **Iceland Gull**. Unfortunately the Ring-billed Gull that wintered at the lagoon for more than 15 years is no longer here, but another must be due.

Dargan Bay **3** is a partially tidal mudflat adjoining the old dump and always has a good concentration of birds. The bay will have high numbers of **Shelduck** and waders such as **Knot** and **Black-tailed Godwit**. It is also worthwhile checking for **Greater Scaup**, particularly at the end of Edgewater Road. Scanning the fence posts on the old dump

area should get a **Common Buzzard** for the day list, and don't forget to check the **Common Eider** and grebe flocks on the lough for something rarer.

The road opposite Dargan Drive leads up Herdman Channel, a most uninviting-looking piece of habitat which always has good numbers of birds. This should get you close to many waders, including possibly the only **Greenshank** for the circuit, and numerous **Eurasian Teal**.

If you have time, take a run up to check the Waterworks off Antrim Road **4**. It should produce more wildfowl, though these will mostly be **Tufted Duck** and **Common Pochard**, as well as the opportunity of a white-winged gull. The bushes around the fire station used to be a regular wintering site for **Common Chiffchaff** and are worth a quick check.

Heading south-east across the River Lagan, turn into the Harbour Estate at Dee Street. Park at the new Sam Thompson bridge and walk into Victoria Park **5**. The alders and other trees hold **Treecreeper**, with **Mealy Redpoll** and **Siskin** a strong possibility. Do not ignore the channels around Victoria Park, where waders, gulls

and **Little Egret** are frequent.

The next stop is Belfast Harbour RSPB **6**, which is due to reopen in early 2015 after refurbishment works. Look out for **Eurasian Wigeon**, **Northern Shoveler**, **Common Snipe**, **Water Rail**, **Ruff** and close-up views of **Black-tailed Godwit**. The last few winters have produced a **Green-winged Teal** for the more diligent, and any roosting gulls are again worth checking for a **Glaucous** or **Iceland**.

The final site is Kinnegar Shore and Lagoons. Once again, diligently check all gulls and ducks (either on the beach or in the lagoons) **7**. **Black Guillemots** will be off-shore and **Little Egret** frequents the pool. The sewerage plant at Kinnegar will have **Tufted Duck** and in November held a first-winter **Ring-necked Duck**. If there at high tide, waders will be resting on the sides of the sludge tanks. Keep a look out for a **Carrion Crow** (one has been regular around B&Q!) among the default **Hooded Crows** and **Raven**. This last corvid now breeds within Belfast city boundaries.

All in you should have seen around 70-80 species, yet only be minutes from Belfast city centre. ■

Belfast Lough attracts good numbers of Greater Scaup.



## VISITOR INFORMATION

### READS



- **Where to Watch Birds in Ireland** by Clive Hutchinson and Paul Milne (second edition, Christopher Helm, £18.99) – order for £16.99 on page 77.
- **Finding Birds in Ireland** by Eric Dempsey and Michael O'Clery (Gill & Macmillan Ltd).

### Sites and access

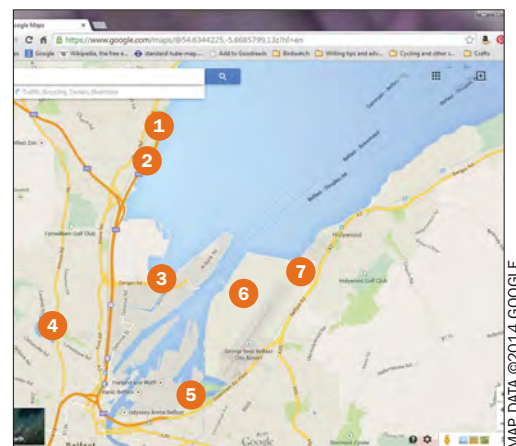
There is free access to all sites, but car parking charges may apply. Local bus services are run by Translink Metro; call +44 (0)28 90 66 66 30 or visit [www.translink.co.uk/Services/Metro-Service-Page](http://www.translink.co.uk/Services/Metro-Service-Page). The lough is on Route 9 of the Sustrans national cycle network. There is wheelchair access to the observation room and one outdoor viewpoint, as well as a disabled toilet, at Belfast Harbour RSPB.

### Maps

OSNI Discoverer Series Sheet 15.

### Web resources

- [www.rspb.org.uk/belfastlough](http://www.rspb.org.uk/belfastlough) for more information on the RSPB reserve.
- [www.nibirds.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.nibirds.blogspot.co.uk) for latest sightings and to report scarce or rare birds.



See [bit.ly/BWMaps](http://bit.ly/BWMaps) for links to fully annotated Google maps





# JANUARY'S TARGET BIRD

## Ring-billed Gull



Ring-billed Gull – the yellow-billed bird with its eponymous black ring – is often seen in the company of commoner gull species, as such Black-headed.

Once classified as a 'mega', this gull is now an annual visitor to Britain, especially south-western areas, although it has been seen widely across England and Wales, with fewer records in Scotland.

First recorded in 1973 in Glamorgan, in the 1990s there were about 75 records annually in Britain, with an exceptional 108 in 1992. But numbers since have fallen to about 50 annually, with only 16 new birds in 2010. Among newly arriving birds, first-years appear mainly from November to February, while second-years and adults turn up from November to April, with a peak in March/April, which may be birds that have wintered further south moving north.

Several individuals return year after year to spend the winter in a favoured spot. Famous long-stayers were present at Barnstaple, Devon, from 1988 until March 2005, Astromness, Orkney, from January 1988 to 2008, Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex,

from March 2000 every winter until 2011 and at the Isle of Dogs, Greater London, from November 1996 until August 2009. More recently, a bird at Dingwall, Highland, was first seen in 2004 and returned in September 2014, while one at Walpole Park, Hampshire, turned up in 2003 and returned on 24 October 2014.

Most of these returning birds arrive back in August/September and leave again in February/March, with no clue as to where they spend the summer, although some birds remain into spring and occasionally later. In 2009 a Ring-billed Gull was found paired with a Common Gull in Scotland, though breeding was not confirmed.

### How to see

The species is best looked for in the company of other gulls: at a roost, or other gathering place such as a local park or beach. When looking through a group of gulls, keep checking as birds

arrive and leave all the time. Look at close birds as well as those in the distance – even a scarce visitor like this can be very

tame. Check BirdGuides ([www.birdguides.com](http://www.birdguides.com)) for the latest sightings and to see where past birds have wintered. ■



## FIND YOUR OWN

Sightings tend to be mostly in south-west England and south Wales, but Ring-billed Gull has been recorded in many counties, both coastal and inland. It is frequently found on man-made habitats such as lakes, car parks and landfill sites, where it will come for food and to roost, which can make it easy to find and relocate. It also uses fields and beaches. Two sites marked with asterisks have returning birds each winter, while the others have near-annual sightings.

### England

- **Cornwall:** Helston boating lake (SW 655272) and Hayle Estuary (SW 560378)
- **Dorset:** Radipole Lake RSPB (SY 671804)
- **Hampshire:** Walpole Park, Gosport (SZ 617997)\*
- **Lancashire:** Crosby Marine Park (SJ 318973)

### Wales

- **Glamorgan:** Black Pill (SS 619908)
- **Pembrokeshire:** Llys-y-Fran Reservoir (SN 039243)

### Scotland

- **Highland:** Dingwall (NH 548594)\*



VISIT [WWW.BIRDWATCH.CO.UK](http://WWW.BIRDWATCH.CO.UK) FOR TIPS ON FINDING MANY MORE TARGET BIRDS





# Unnatural surroundings

**David Callahan** looks at how birds use the buildings and environments we have created, and shows how some quite unpromising man-made habitats can help preserve wildlife.

PHOTOS THIS PAGE: JAMES HANLON

In modern Britain, it is difficult to find a habitat that couldn't be described as man made. Indeed, our fields and hedges, chalk downs, heaths and moorlands are all created and managed by humans in whole or in part, and would almost all revert to oak woodland if left to their own devices.

However, nature makes use of any potential resource and many of our bird-friendly habitats are almost entirely created by ourselves, or left behind after we've finished using them.

There are many scientifically official ways of classifying British habitats, and despite the knowledge that we have a hand in almost all of them, conservationists and ecologists tend to use various combinations of vegetation and geology to categorise the natural types of habitat that underlie the landscapes of Britain. Human-derived environments seem somewhat disregarded, but now make up a large part of Britain's potential bird habitats.

Crick (1992) divided Britain's habitats into natural and human sites, and then further split them into urban, suburban and rural. Next subdividing them into buildings, gardens, parks, sewage works, roadsides, railway embankments and rubbish tips (along with the catch-all 'other' category), he encompassed the majority of terrestrial man-made sites.

Many of Crick's freshwater sites are also anthropogenic: a large number of ponds, small water-bodies and lakes, as well as reservoirs, gravel pits, ditches and canals, all have their natural analogues but are clearly constructed by people. Several of his natural habitats also have a sub-classification for disturbance, and this can come into play on coast or mountain or anywhere in between.

However, here we are mostly concerned with bird-friendly sites that would not exist at all without our activities. This could be your back garden or even an area as massive as the Ouse Washes, a 20-mile-wide drainage zone created in the Cambridgeshire fens in the 17th century to drain excess water from the Great Ouse river, in the process inadvertently creating habitat which is now home to internationally important numbers of Bewick's and Whooper Swans, and breeding habitat for declining waders such as Northern Lapwing and Common Snipe.

## Sharing our homes

Our homes and buildings provide valuable shelter and even foraging for very familiar species such as House Martin, Swallow, Common Swift, Robin, Blackbird, House Sparrow and many



**Main image:** Barrington Cement Works, formerly owned by CEMEX, is an active quarry in Cambridgeshire that is also managed for wildlife. Despite looking like a typical industrial wasteland, the site holds 15 species of conservation concern in winter, including Peregrine Falcon, Woodcock and Skylark.

**Inset:** though sites for the species are often disturbed, Black Redstart has remained a typical species of urban neglect and renewal.

more, usually dependent on how urban, suburban or rural one's living quarters are. In addition, the combination of the inaccessibility of tall city buildings and the presence of bounteous prey in the form of Feral Rock Doves has helped Peregrine Falcon recover its numbers since being almost poisoned to extinction in the 1950s. The superficially barren areas of our inner cities have also provided good habitat for Black Redstart since the species first colonised the bomb sites of London and Birmingham in the immediate post-war years. The British

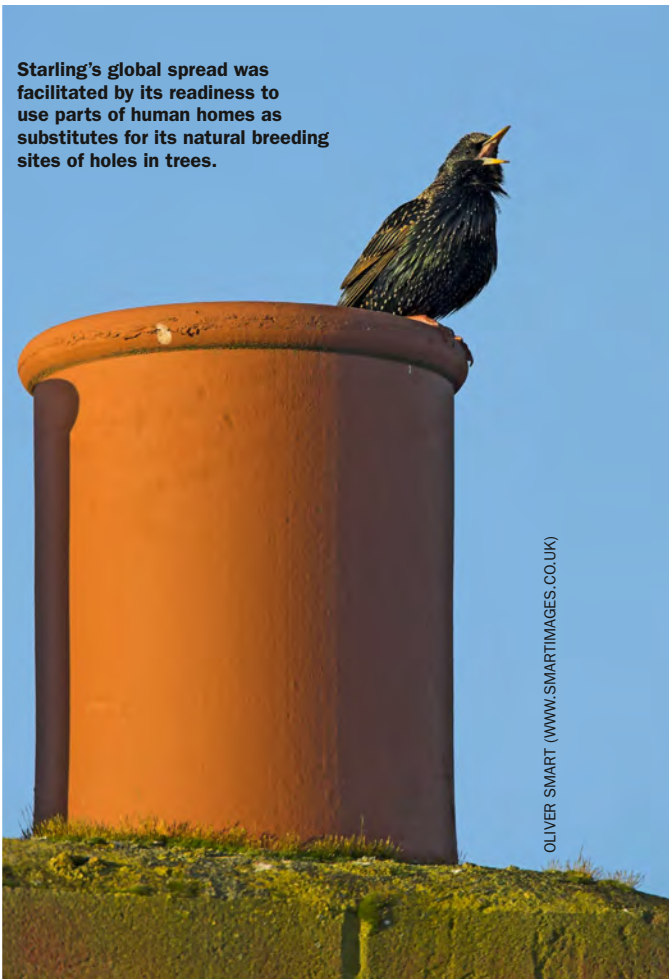




Collared Dove naturally colonised Britain after first breeding in Norfolk in 1956, and it is unlikely that its spread would have become quite so ubiquitous here without its proclivity for human habitations and the surrounding land.



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSOFTHEUK.COM)



Starling's global spread was facilitated by its readiness to use parts of human homes as substitutes for its natural breeding sites of holes in trees.

OLIVER SMART (WWW.SMARTIMAGES.CO.UK)

Trust for Ornithology (BTO) states that up to 44 pairs of Black Redstart breed in Britain, and at least half of these are in London, either in the City and West End or along the industrial zones of the Inner Thames. Famously, Battersea Power Station is a stronghold for both species (see *Birdwatch* 269: 62-64).

The presence of these two scarce species in particular has seen conservationists seek mitigation for any changes in their very urban environments, particularly in the case

of the redstart where 'green roofs' have been created specifically for the purpose of preserving its numbers. Despite this, singing 'Black Reds' still turn up on City banks and West End shop roofs, far from their specially created refuges, and the species also winters on southern and south-western coasts, in both built-up areas and on cliffs.

Away from buildings, our gardens encourage most of the species mentioned and also harbour other visitors. The seemingly unstoppable spread of

Collared Dove may well have been encouraged by the prevalence of traditional British gardens, while the increasing numbers of Sparrowhawk (itself formerly in decline) have certainly been bolstered by tree cover and the large concentrations of passerine activity around our popular bird feeders.

Many city parks are an extension of our gardens, but others are not so well tended and hold patches of scrub, woodland and water bodies, all of which attract more unusual species, and even



JAMES HANLON

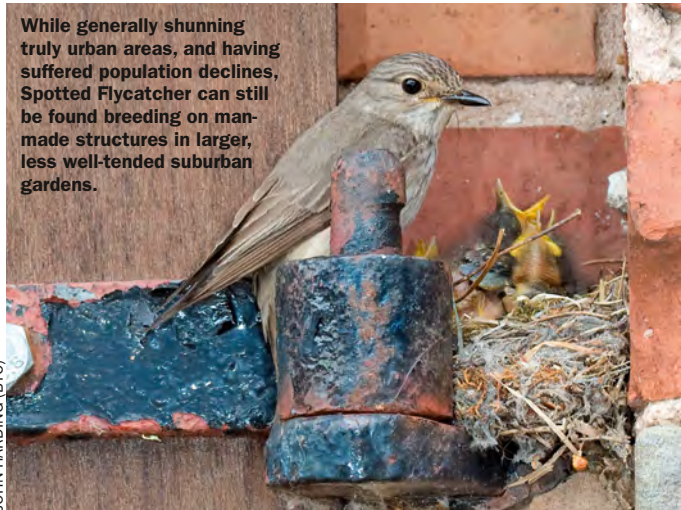
These roosting gulls on a jetty in the River Thames, adjacent to a landfill site at Rainham, Greater London, emphasise how artificial environments and human waste have enabled several species to expand their ranges and populations. As landfills are gradually wound down, it will be interesting to see how gulls adapt to a future in which discarded food may not be so readily available.





## MAN-MADE HABITATS

While generally shunning truly urban areas, and having suffered population declines, Spotted Flycatcher can still be found breeding on man-made structures in larger, less well-tended suburban gardens.



JOHN HARDING (BTO)

Even firsts for Britain can turn up in the built-up environment – this Black-faced Bunting was at Pennington Flash CP, a wetland created by mining subsidence on the edge of Greater Manchester, in spring 1994.

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)



### BUILT-UP SPECIES

- 1 Black Redstart:** first breeding in Britain in 1923, it stayed on after the Second World War, and good numbers remain in London and Midlands conurbations.
- 2 Peregrine Falcon:** from a low point in the 1960s, Peregrine has built its population up again after the banning of DDT and is now present in most major cities, and many quarry and cliff sites around Britain.
- 3 Little Egret:** first breeding in Britain in 1996, this dainty white heron has established colonies all over southern Britain, with several notable at reservoirs and other man-made water bodies.
- 4 Swallow:** originally a cave nester, this cosmopolitan species uses more rural man-made structures in Britain, being replaced by House Martin in the suburbs.
- 5 Black-necked Grebe:** although largely a species of more natural or man-managed wetlands, this species is also found wintering in double figures on some reservoirs and even occasionally breeds in habitats like reclaimed gravel pits.
- 6 Kingfisher:** now adapted very well to concrete-lined canals and navigation channels in towns, but can suffer in harsh winters, when desperate individuals can even be seen fishing in garden ponds.
- 7 Waxwing:** notoriously a species of ornamental berry trees in supermarket car parks in winter, this exotic breeder of the north Eurasian taiga can even feature on a garden list if you're lucky.
- 8 Ring Ouzel:** usually a denizen of remote upland habitats, Ring Ouzel is often seen using larger parks and urban grasslands on migration.
- 9 Woodcock:** this secretive species can be flushed from underfoot even in suburban parks in winter.
- 10 Kittiwake:** Newcastle holds around 600 pairs of this normally rather pelagic gull, the furthest inland colony in the world. The birds have recently found themselves at odds with the city's regeneration, however.

the odd vagrant. Species such as Tawny Owl, Nuthatch, Coal Tit, Goldcrest and Bullfinch make their homes in our parks and larger gardens, particularly when adjacent to scrub and woodland. Ponds also provide a constant water supply for the commoner species, as well as helping more exotic species such as Kingfisher and Grey Heron survive harsher weather.

The water bodies of built-up areas – particularly reservoirs and gravel pits – can attract a host of passage and breeding species. These can also add to an attractive patchwork of other urban and suburban habitats, creating wildlife corridors that assist migration and range expansion. Add to these natural river basins and man-made canals and river diversions, and the whole of Britain has these routes. The evidence for this can be seen when such water bodies are situated in valleys, and provide useful drop-ins for migrating waders and wildfowl, as well as 'landscape lines' for raptors and passerines to follow. Gravel workings that are still engaged have traditionally held Little Ringed Plover, which first bred in Britain in 1938. The species actively maintains its breeding population of around 1,200 pairs mainly on sand

and gravel pits and the stony margins of artificial water bodies, including reservoirs and man-made nature reserves, despite being very susceptible to disturbance and flooding.

Perhaps the real boon for tick-starved inland birders can be a good-sized local reservoir. Near the coast, these can be refuges for all manner of vagrant seabirds, but an inland reservoir can provide a good stop-over for waders and passerines following the lines of the landscape, as well as harbouring seaduck, divers and scarce grebes, particularly after harsh weather. Even the local tiny reservoir in Alexandra Park, London, near the *Birdwatch* office has produced Slavonian and Black-necked Grebes, Bewick's Swan, Brent Goose and Kittiwake in recent years, right in the heart of suburban London.

### Big clean-up

Our busy artificial jetties and river banks can provide roosting and foraging sites for sometimes large flocks of passage waders, along with pipits and wagtails, while the churning turmoil of the river itself can give ample fishing for terns, gulls and waterfowl. Larger

**King George VI Reservoir is one of the largest expanses of water in the Greater London area. Opening in 1947, it soon came to hold important numbers of Goosander and Common Goldeneye, as well as more common wildfowl species. Like many large inland water bodies, it frequently turns up scarcities and rarities, concentrating them into an easily observed area, though as with many working industrial sites, access is by permit only.**



ANDREW MOON



A Great Egret is chased off by a Grey Heron at Abberton Reservoir, Essex, last September. This large egret, like Little Egret before it, has also expanded its range into Britain in the last few years.



BOB COOPER

urban rivers can draw seabirds, divers, grebes and scarcer species such as Little Gull and Black Tern deep into the heart of urban ports; as well as providing shelter, with authorities now cleaning up the major rivers due to EU law, there are more fish and invertebrates to help such birds ride out storms.

Built-up areas and industrial workings can also afford protected breeding sites for species otherwise absent, owing to the sites' fences, walls and security guards keeping disturbance to a minimum. Such hidden habitat can enable species like Shelduck and Oystercatcher to breed right in the heart of a city's riverside real estate, while the surrounding scrub, trees and waterside vegetation can provide Great Spotted Woodpecker and Reed and Sedge Warblers nesting sites with a great aspect, and even allow migrants and vagrants to infiltrate the concrete jungle.

When abandoned, industrial and even retail sites can provide good successional habitats. Often classified as 'brownfield sites' by government

and developers, they are sometimes transformed into country parks such as Rabbit Ings CP, South Yorkshire, and Elba Park, Co Durham. With oil- and chemical-sodden soils of ash and fractured concrete, they may seem fairly barren, but the sprouting scrub of Buddleia and hawthorn can provide suitable habitat for Linnet and commoner finches, as well as stop-over sites for chats and thrushes on migration and hunting grounds for Kestrel, Short-eared and Barn Owls. The natural riches of such sites are often short lived, as developers frequently have eyes on them for further building. However, West Thurrock Marshes, Essex, for example, has been saved from becoming a Post Office depot and looks likely to be transformed into a publicly accessible nature park.

### The new lowlands

Many of Britain's nature reserves are now fashioned from whole areas once the preserve of the Ministry of Defence (Rainham Marshes, Gtr London/Essex), coal mining (Pennington Flash CP, Lancashire), agricultural drainage (Marazion Marsh RSPB, Cornwall), clay

and cement diggings (Cliffe Pools RSPB, Kent), gravel pits (Amwell HMWT, Hertfordshire) or even intentionally flooded dune slacks (Tentsmuir NNR, Fife). Britain is too populous to have preserved much of its truly wild lowland habitat, and man-made habitats need further assistance and maintenance to improve their attractiveness to the birds and wildlife that the sites originally hosted, or to a whole new flora and fauna, post rewilding.

What we term 'countryside' is in fact almost entirely man made; the chequer board of fields, hedgerows and copses that covers most of lowland and even parts of upland Britain have been largely created and maintained by farmers. The historical development of agricultural techniques and methods has provided a dynamically changing rural environment that has enabled the waxing and waning of the populations of dozens of bird species. Most of our familiar farmland (and, indeed, town) birds are creatures of forest edge and scrub habitats that have 'lucked out' through time and found themselves enjoying a boom in artificial versions of habitats similar enough to enable exploitation and adaptation.

However, refinements of those same techniques – in a word, their intensification – has now resulted in the accelerating decline of many of those same species. With man-made habitats constantly in flux due to our own activities, the bird species that do well mostly have to be generalists and fast to adapt, and the rise in their numbers is often temporary when looked at through the prism of history. ■



A juvenile female Peregrine Falcon at a disused chalk quarry in Cambridgeshire. While the species has been quick to use such sites to help recover its numbers after a decline in the first part of the 20th century, its expansion into the very centre of cities as a key part of an artificial ecosystem preying on Feral Rock Doves has been perhaps most notable.

JAMES HANLON

### REFERENCES

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# Eating out with the birds

Feeding your garden visitors this winter can give you a front-row view into the ins and outs of their lives, writes **Kate Slater**.

NIGEL BLAKE (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)



Providing a wide variety of food for birds will attract a range of species to your garden, including – if you're lucky – birds more associated with woodlands, such as Nuthatch (above) and Great Spotted Woodpecker (left).

Whether it's the jostling of Starlings as they scramble for position on a bird bath, the expectant face of the Robin that lands on nearby soil as you weed, or the blue-and-yellow flash of a Blue Tit stopping by for a snack, a well-cared-for garden feeding station is rarely empty.

Our wild birds can provide daily entertainment; they're full of boundless energy and add colour and interest to your patch of green. However, in turn they often desperately need our help, especially in the winter months when life is a continuous struggle for survival. Luckily, they're not high-maintenance guests and don't require luxuries or too many treats. Like us they have three basic needs: food, water and shelter – any hospitality you can offer will be well received.

Garden birds pretty quickly become wise to areas where food is left out and they will return to the dinner table they know is likely to be well stocked. It is imperative that once you start putting out food that you continue to provide a steady supply throughout winter, topping up your feeders or tables whenever necessary.

## Food for thought

Many kinds of foods can be given to your avian visitors and you may be surprised at how much you already have in your cupboards and fridges. Mild



NIGEL BLAKE (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)





Species such as Long-tailed (left) and Blue (right) Tits will eat high-energy 'nibbles' made from mealworms and suet.



Sunflower seeds are another high-energy food enjoyed by a range of bird species.



More unusual species that could be attracted to bird tables may include Reed Bunting, especially in winter when food in the wider countryside is scarce.

grated cheese, cooked potatoes, unsalted bacon and soft fruit are among the everyday foods that are good for birds, and putting these out as scraps is a great way of using up unwanted leftovers.

It is also a good idea to provide a high-quality seed mix which will provide the nutrition and energy birds need to survive the cold weather. It is best to choose a mix with little millet, as this small seed is fairly nutrient free. Foods such as the RSPB's new bird seed range contain specially selected ingredients, with tailored combinations ensuring that there's nothing your favourite visiting birds can't or won't eat. There are no 'fillers' to pad out the mixes – everything is chosen to help wild birds keep up those all-important energy levels during the long hard winter months.

In terms of sourcing ingredients, the RSPB has also become the first to sell 'Fair to Nature'-certified sunflower hearts and seeds, which are key ingredients in many of the mixes. This means that the farms the seed is brought from must meet rigorous conservation standards set by Conservation Grade, an organisation that strives to recreate Europe's biodiversity through nature-friendly food production, allowing wildlife to flourish. By buying this certified seed, you are helping struggling farmland wildlife in Britain and Europe,

as well as the birds in your garden.

Bird seed may all look the same but the benefit for birds can vary. Sunflower seeds are grown all over the world, but the RSPB uses only European seeds and hearts that the charity knows are grown on well-run farms. The seed is checked for toxins and thoroughly cleaned with no chemical treatment. Unwelcome extra 'ingredients' like stray insects are removed with a blast of hot air.

Peanuts are relatively cheap, making them a popular addition to seed mixes, but they come from further afield because they cannot be grown in Europe. The RSPB uses only UK-sourced, food-grade suet with a higher level of purity. No calcium is added as it's unnecessary for garden birds which generally get all they need in their natural diet. The charity is also working to keep food miles down, and nearly all the ingredients which can be sourced from Britain are grown within sight of the packing facility.

Other measures of quality are the things that aren't included. Wheat is the most common ingredient in many seed mixtures, and on paper it looks great for protein and energy, often featuring in many mixes marketed as 'high energy', 'premium' or even 'supreme', but wheat grains are very hard so many garden birds are unlikely eat them. The same

goes for peas – kibbled (that is, crushed or split) or whole – while red dari (a cereal popular with Jays, pigeons and finches) looks attractive in a mix but is rarely eaten by other garden birds because of its bitter taste.

It's best not to buy a seed mix without checking the ingredients list, printed on the pack by law. Even if the energy rating printed on the pack looks great, it's no good if that energy is locked in rock-hard seeds that your Robins, thrushes and Blackbirds won't eat.

### Choosing the best

There are various mixes for feeders, bird tables and ground feeding, put together to suit species that feed in different ways. The better mixtures contain plenty of oil-rich seeds such as sunflower hearts and whole sunflower seeds. Small seeds attract species such as House Sparrows, Dunnocks, finches, Reed Buntings and Collared Doves, while flaked maize is taken readily by Blackbirds.

Tits and Greenfinches favour sunflower hearts and seeds, and peanuts. Mixes that contain chunks or whole nuts are suitable for winter feeding only, as small and young birds can choke on large pieces. Pinhead oatmeal (made from coarse-cut oats) is excellent for many birds, and naked oats (lacking their husk) are even higher in oil and energy than





## GARDEN BIRDS

ordinary ones. Wheat and barley grains are often included in seed mixtures, but they are really only suitable for pigeons, doves and Pheasants, which feed on the ground and rapidly increase in numbers, frequently deterring the smaller species.

Avoid seed mixtures that contain split peas, beans, dried rice or lentils, as again only the large species can eat them dry. These are added to some cheaper seed mixes to bulk them up. Any mixture containing green or pink lumps should also be avoided as these are likely to be dog biscuit pieces, which can only be eaten when soaked.

Sunflower seeds are an excellent year-round food, while the higher oil content in black sunflower seeds makes them superior. Sunflower hearts (the husked kernels) are a popular no-mess food, and the best-quality ones are higher in oil (and therefore energy) than peanuts. This food is almost universally accepted and enjoyed by most garden bird species. Niger seeds (from an African member of the daisy family) are small and black with a high oil content. These very small seeds are particular favourites with Goldfinches and Siskins, though due to their size they need a special type of feeder.

### Paying peanuts

Peanuts are high in fat and are popular with tits, Greenfinches, House Sparrows, Nuthatches, Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Siskins. Crushed or grated nuts attract Robins, Dunnocks and even Wrens. Nuthatches and Coal Tits may hoard peanuts. Salted or dry roasted peanuts should be avoided as many garden bird species can't process salt and will die if given too much (for the same reason it's best not to put out salty bacon or crisps). The skin of peanuts can be high in a

natural toxin called aflatoxin which can kill birds – buy them from a reputable dealer to guarantee they are free from such 'nasties'.

Peanuts have to be grown in tropical soils so they are not a natural food for European bird species. They also have to be transported long distances, so while the RSPB sells them to meet customer demand, it does not encourage their use. The charity's buggy and fruity nibbles are a great alternative to peanuts, and can be put in a wire-mesh peanut feeder. They don't have the choking hazard of peanuts so they are also safe to put out whole on bird tables or the ground. They are loved by many garden birds and are made in

the UK, so they don't accumulate the transportation miles that peanuts do. Suet balls and

other fat-based bird cakes, nibbles and sprinkles are excellent high-energy winter foods, and are popular with many garden birds. If fat balls are sold in nylon mesh bags, always remove the bag before putting the balls out – the mesh can trap and injure birds.

RSPB suet products are specially formulated to make them suitable for year-round feeding. Although food shortages can occur at any time of year, the natural food supply is usually lowest in winter and spring, so this is when garden birds will reap the most benefit from the food you put out. During the course of an average winter day, an adult Great Tit weighing around 20 g would need to consume 6 or 7 g of mixed seeds (about one third of its body weight) in order to satisfy its energy requirements. So why not offer your feathered dinner guests some gourmet grub, especially if it is ethically sourced too? ■



**Collared Dove** is a ground-feeding bird which can be given larger grains such as wheat and barley. Numbers of this species can rapidly increase and scare off smaller birds, so it might be best to position a ground feeder away from your main feeding station.

CHRIS GOMERSALL (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)



## BIG GARDEN BIRDWATCH

**ONCE** you start providing food and water on a regular basis, your tables and feeders will almost certainly become a hive of activity. You can further help the often declining species that visit your garden by taking part in the RSPB's Big Garden Birdwatch. Count the birds that you see in your garden for just one hour over the weekend of 25-26 January and let the charity know what you see. For all the information needed to take part, as well as the results from the 2014 BGBW, visit [www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch](http://www.rspb.org.uk/birdwatch). ■

Fruits such as apples are attractive to several bird species, including the ever-popular Robin.



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Lines are open 8 am–8 pm. Calls may be recorded for training purposes. All profits from the sale of goods are paid to the RSPB (registered charity number in England and Wales 207076, in Scotland SC037654) by its wholly owned subsidiary RSPB Sales Ltd (registered company no. England 2693778).  
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THE votes have been counted, the results are in, and we're pleased to announce the winners of the inaugural Birdwatch Birders' Choice Awards. Huge numbers of readers and Facebook fans took part and voted to recognise the most deserving people, companies and products in birding and conservation – as well as identify this year's conservation villain. Participants also had the chance to win £250 worth of birding books; go to [www.birdwatch.co.uk](http://www.birdwatch.co.uk) to find out who won this fantastic prize.

## THE WINNERS

### 1 Conservation Hero of the Year

With 55 per cent of the votes, **Chris Packham** (pictured right) was the clear winner in this category. As well as being a fixture on our TV screens in *Springwatch* and *Autumnwatch*, Chris has taken on illegal hunting in Malta, supported Hen Harrier Day, tackled animal cruelty in *I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here* and saved the 'Tesco Pied Wagtail' – we have no hesitation in naming him our first-ever Conservation Hero of the Year.

### 2 Local Hero of the Year

This was incredibly difficult to judge – there are so many people out there working tirelessly on behalf of birds and conservation, and there were lots of worthy nominations. In the end, though, we agreed with the many participants who named young conservationist **Findlay Wilde** (pictured below) as their Local Hero of the Year. Managing Editor Dominic Mitchell commented: "Through his participation in Hen Harrier Day, highly readable blog, social media output, online fundraising and even an *Autumnwatch* appearance, Findlay Wilde has demonstrated what it takes to be a model young conservationist. We'll be awarding Findlay a special two-year honorary subscription to the magazine to mark his achievements."



DAN BRIDGE

### 3 Company of the Year

Winner **Lush Cosmetics** was a very popular choice in this category, gaining more than 50 per cent of the votes. Owned by birder Mark Constantine – himself nominated as Local Hero by some of you – the company is well known for its strong stance against animal cruelty and this year, among other initiatives, supported the campaign to protect Hen Harriers.



### 4 Campaign of the Year

Despite strong competition from Hen Harrier Day, Chris Packham's **#MaltaMassacre**, a campaign which successfully raised awareness of illegal bird killing in Malta, came out on top.



NICK WILCOX-BROWN





## 5 Guano Award for Environmental Harm

The clear frontrunner in this category was **Owen Paterson MP** (pictured above), with half of all votes cast. Formerly Secretary of State at DEFRA, his tenure as Environment Secretary can only be described as a disaster – he presided over the Badger cull and opposed a ban on neonicotinoid pesticides, among other notable failures.

## 6 Site of the Year

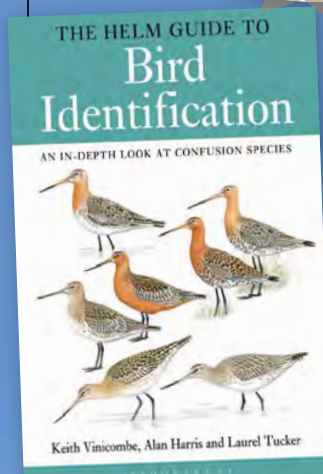
Home of the Spurn Migration Festival and a prime passage watchpoint, **Spurn Point** in East Yorkshire (main photo) was popular with our readers and Facebook fans – winning Site of the Year with one third of all votes. Steart Marshes WWT, Somerset, was a worthy runner-up with 23 per cent.

## 7 Rarity Event of the Year

The National Trust's Widcombe estate on the Isle of Wight probably wasn't on the radar of many birders prior to July 2014, when news emerged that two pairs of **European Bee-eaters** (pictured above right) had successfully bred at the site, and with more votes than any other these scarce beauties are 2014's Rarity Event of the Year.

## 8 Best New Product of the Year

With 60 per cent of all votes cast, the **Collins Bird Guide app** was the landslide winner in the Best New Product section.



## 9 Bird Book of the Year

This was a very close-run thing between two highly popular books: ***The Helm Guide to Bird Identification*** and Martin Garner's *Challenge Series: Autumn*. The former, with 39 per cent of the votes, pipped the latter (30 per cent) to the post and is 2014's Bird Book of the Year.

## 10 Discovery of the Year

Another closely fought section, the finding that **neonicotinoids** (38 per cent of the votes) are harmful to birds as well as bees and other insects only just beat a simple new technique (37 per cent) using streamers and floats to reduce albatross deaths on longline fishing hooks by up to 99 per cent.

Thanks to all those who voted in such overwhelming numbers to choose the winners (and loser!) in birding in 2014, and who made these inaugural awards such a success. For more coverage, go to [www.birdwatch.co.uk](http://www.birdwatch.co.uk). ■





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# Canada and Cackling Geese

## PHOTO GUIDE

1



JULIAN BHALERAO

**1 Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (front right) with Canada Geese *B c canadensis* (Kelling, Norfolk, 26 December 2012).** Due to their very small size, Cackling Geese are easily separated from feral *canadensis* Canada Geese, but identifying such birds to form is much more difficult. Wild Cackling Geese in Britain are most likely to be of the north-easterly subspecies *hutchinsii*, but escaped birds could be of any form and may be impossible to identify to subspecific level. This bird shows *hutchinsii*'s typically short and narrow bill, a steep forehead and a flat crown that peaks slightly at the rear, producing a distinctive square-headed appearance. Its plumage is not that dissimilar to *canadensis*, although some are darker.

### PROFILE



**KEITH VINICOMBE** is a birder and ornithologist who has written several books and papers on identification. He is also Birdwatch's ID consultant.

**There's far more to the familiar Canada Goose than the long-established feral population which is now so numerous in Britain. With the species recently split into two, the annual occurrence of wild individuals on the European side of the Atlantic clearly deserves our attention. Yet remarkably, neither the newly recognised Cackling Goose nor its vagrant Canada cousins have yet been admitted to the British Ornithological Union's British list. Keith Vinicombe unravels the complexities of identification and taxonomy.**







## BASIC PRINCIPLES

In 2004, the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) split Canada Goose *Branta canadensis* into two species, based mainly on mtDNA evidence, their divergence having occurred approximately one million years ago (Mlodinow *et al* 2008). The large-bodied interior and southern North American breeding forms continued to be known as Canada Goose, while the small-bodied tundra breeding forms became Cackling Goose *B hutchinsii*.

A year later, the British Ornithologists' Union (BOU) followed suit, but decided to rename the two species 'Greater Canada Goose' and 'Lesser Canada Goose'. The problem with this is that the subspecies *parvipes*, traditionally known as Lesser Canada Goose, is treated under the new taxonomy as a form of Greater Canada Goose. As Canada Geese are native to North America, it was surely incumbent on the BOU to have deferred to the AOU's nomenclature. Since then, both *Birdwatch* and *British Birds* have adopted the American names Canada Goose and Cackling Goose, and thankfully the wider birding community appears to be following suit.

The identification of the various forms of the Canada Goose complex has always been controversial. It is easy to get bogged down with the sheer complexity of the subject, but the main advantage of the AOU's 2004 decision was that it simplified the matter considerably: it divided them into 'big geese' and 'little geese', with the intermediate forms being lumped in with the larger taxa.

### Status in Britain

The form of Canada Goose that breeds so commonly in Britain is nominate *canadensis*,

## “The bottom line with vagrant Cackling Geese is not to try too hard to ascribe them to form”

which was introduced in the 17th century. Wild Canada and Cackling Geese reach Britain and Ireland annually, the initial vagrancy apparently taking place in or around their Arctic breeding ranges. The birds then 'abmigrate' to Britain and Ireland with their carrier species: Pink-footed, Greenland White-fronted and Barnacle Geese. By far the most likely form to reach Britain is the highly migratory nominate Cackling Goose subspecies *B h hutchinsii*, sometimes known as Richardson's Cackling Goose, which breeds as far east as Baffin Island and the Ungava Peninsula in north-eastern Canada, and rarely also in western Greenland (Mlodinow *et al* 2008).

To the south of Richardson's are two larger forms of Canada Goose that have also been claimed in Britain. The first is Todd's Canada Goose *B c interior*, which breeds around Hudson and James Bays. Given that it has recently expanded its range into Greenland, it must be considered an increasingly likely vagrant. The second is Lesser Canada Goose *B c parvipes*, which breeds in boreal and sub-Arctic habitats from Hudson Bay west to Alaska.

Turning to the Cackling Geese, Mlodinow *et al* 2008 recommend extreme caution in ascribing any given individual to a particular subspecies, so it must be accepted that not all can be identified to subspecific level. In flocks, they consider that only 90-95 per cent of birds viewed closely can be subspecifically identified with a high degree of confidence. A firm conclusion is far less

likely with lone birds. They also warn against identifying birds from photographs. They estimate that the chances of identifying a lone, photographed bird may be as low as 10-20 per cent.

There is broad overlap in plumage features among the taxa, underpart coloration being highly variable within each form. Immatures of all subspecies average paler than adults, but perceived coloration is highly subjective, even under ideal conditions with birds of known subspecies present.

To complicate things further, whereas adults have only one complete moult in late summer, juveniles have a post-juvenile body moult from autumn onwards. Accurate subspecific identification in the field must also rely heavily on size and structure, but this can vary dramatically with changing posture, activity and distance. It should also be borne in mind that apparent size may be unreliable simply because all taxa show some degree of sexual dimorphism, males being larger than females. Remarkably, adult size is also significantly affected by the birds' diet as goslings (Mlodinow *et al* 2008).

In Britain, the bottom line with vagrant Cackling Geese is not to try too hard to ascribe them to form. Having said that, birds accompanying Greenland Barnacle Geese and Pink-footed Geese should be wild and are most likely to be *hutchinsii*, but those seen elsewhere or with other goose species could be escapes or possibly vagrants of any form. Therefore, it may not be worth spending too much effort deciding which taxon may be involved.

### Lone vagrants

Most Cackling Goose records in Britain are of birds associating with appropriate carrier species, particularly Barnacle and Pink-footed Geese. But what of lone birds turning up elsewhere? Such records are invariably dismissed as escapes, but are we right to maintain this negative attitude?

In the late autumn and winter of 2011-12, following a remarkable season locally for American waders, three separate Cackling Geese (all apparently *hutchinsii*) were recorded on or around the Severn Estuary, and all disappeared in March or April. We usually assume that Cackling Geese only turn up with appropriate carrier species, but why can't single birds make it? Lone American Wigeon, another gregarious species, routinely cross the Atlantic.

Mlodinow *et al* 2008 (quoting unpublished data from Malcolm Ogilvie) state that in Britain there are about 60 Richardson's Cackling Geese in captivity, compared with approximately 200 *minima*, yet the British records of *hutchinsii* greatly outnumber those of *minima*. This fact alone would suggest that most of the Richardson's seen in Europe are indeed wild. ■

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2



LISA GEOGHEGAN

**2 Canada Goose *B c canadensis* (Arundel WWT, West Sussex, 17 April 2013).**

The nominate form of Canada Goose was introduced into Britain in the 17th century and is now a common and familiar part of our avifauna. However, it is not universally appreciated and attempts have been made to control its numbers. For example, at Chew Valley Lake, Somerset, the species was increasing exponentially until, following complaints from local farmers, a campaign of egg pricking significantly reduced its numbers, both as a resident and as a moulting species. The colonisation of their main breeding island by Foxes no doubt also accelerated the decline.

3



MICHAEL CASEY

**3 Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (Ballyconnell, Co Sligo, 13 December 2010).**

Although identified as Richardson's Cackling Goose, this bird's identity is not immediately apparent from this photograph (compare it with photo 7). It seems to be similar in size to the accompanying Barnacle Geese, but it is difficult to be sure. In addition, its head feathers are somewhat flattened, rendering an evaluation of its head shape difficult. The bill seems slightly on the long side, but this may be partly due to feather sleeking exaggerating bill length. This shot confirms an important point made by Mlodinow *et al* (2008): identifying lone Cackling Geese from photographs can be problematic.

4



NIGEL MILBOURNE

**4 Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (Blagdon Lake, Somerset, 1 November 2011).**

This bird is largely in juvenile plumage, although it has already started its post-juvenile body moult into first-winter plumage. Most of the scapular feathers are new square first-winter feathers (contrastingly fringed whitish-buff) with a minority of more rounded, browner juvenile feathers. Note that the underparts are quite dark and the bird also showed a slight purplish sheen to its breast. By April it had completed its post-juvenile body moult and, interestingly, its overall plumage tone was then distinctly paler.



5



KEITH VINICOMBE

**5 Possible Todd's Canada Goose *B c interior* (rear bird) with Canada Goose *B c canadensis* (Chew Valley Lake, Somerset, 24 June 2013).** The form *interior* breeds in north-eastern Canada, immediately to the south of Richardson's Cackling Goose. It is similar to the accompanying nominate Canada Goose but is slightly smaller and darker, as well as noticeably browner on the breast; as such it would appear to fit the criteria for this taxon. Remarkably, it was one of three such birds present in 2013 in the moulting Canada Goose flock. Given that these moulting birds originate from a large swathe of south-west England, are we right to maintain a rigidly negative view of such records?

6



TIM BALL

**6 Possible Lesser Canada Goose *B c parvipes* (Lower Farm, Berkshire, December 2007).** Lesser Canada Goose is intermediate in size between nominate Canada and Cackling Geese, and similar in size to White-fronted Goose. Structurally, it has a longer and more slender neck than any of the Cackling forms, and this shows a distinct loop as it feeds. Its head shape is highly variable; many are similar to a more delicate nominate Canada, but some (particularly east of the Rockies) have a short, steep forehead more like Cackling Goose, with a sloping crown and a rounded rear crown. Most are quite white breasted (but some are darker) and the white face patch typically narrows towards the top.

7



KEITH VINICOMBE

**7 Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (Slimbridge WWT, Gloucestershire, March 2012; captive bird).** The uniformly patterned plumage of this adult bird is paler than that of the Blagdon Lake bird shown in image 4, this paleness being a feature quite typical of *hutchinsii*. The breast in particular is distinctly pale and, although it shows a narrow white neck-ring, this is shorter than that of the Blagdon bird, and owing to its lack of contrast with the paler breast, is less conspicuous. Its head is less square, but this is simply due to feather sleeking prompted by anxiety at the approach of the photographer.





8



JOE GERATY

**8 Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (right) with Canada Goose *B c canadensis* (left) (Lissadell, Co Sligo, 31 October 2009).** These two geese are very different in size, the left-hand bird being distinctly larger with more of a loop in its neck when feeding. Its identity is not immediately apparent, although in the field it was apparently identified as a *canadensis* Canada Goose; its plumage certainly fits that form. The smaller goose is similar in size to the accompanying Barnacle Geese and was identified as a *hutchinsii* Cackling Goose. Its short neck and rather dark body plumage, particularly on its breast, support this identification, and it is just about possible to make out its rather square head.

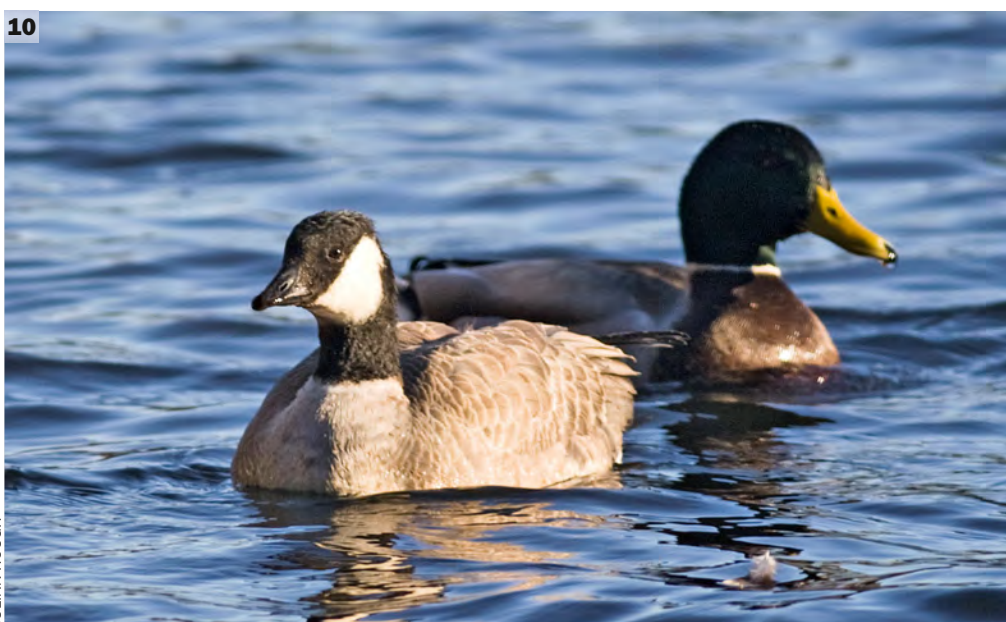
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RICHARD BONSER

**9 Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (Islay, Argyll, 20 December 2009).** Wild Cackling Geese occurring in Britain are most likely to arrive with carrier species that breed in the same general area, the initial vagrancy occurring near or even on their breeding grounds, and subsequently abmigrating with them to Europe. The bird in this photograph appears to be a fairly typical *hutchinsii*. It is similar in size to the accompanying Barnacle Geese, but its plumage – rather pale with a whitish breast – is not dissimilar to that of *canadensis* Canada Goose. Also significant is its steep forehead and rather square head shape, good characters for this particular form.

10



JULIAN HOUGH

**10 Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (Connecticut, USA, 11 December 2006).** This photograph shows the size of Richardson's Cackling Goose in comparison with a drake Mallard – it really is a small bird! It also shows the rather unremarkable plumage (similar to that of the familiar *canadensis* Canada Goose), but note its small bill, rather square-looking head and the narrow white neck-ring.





11



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

**11 Possible Todd's Canada Goose *B c interior* (Little Crosby, Lancashire, 27 December 2005).** Given that this bird is associating with Pink-footed Geese, it would have to be a serious contender as a genuinely wild vagrant. Todd's Canada Geese breed in the sub-Arctic zone to the south and east of Hudson Bay and in recent years have spread into Greenland. As a consequence, occasional individuals are likely to tag onto flocks of Europe-bound Pink-feet. This is a large Canada Goose, not much smaller than nominate *canadensis*. As this photograph shows, it is somewhat darker and browner than our familiar introduced bird.

12



TRISTAN REID

**12 Possible Taverner's Cackling Goose *B h taverneri* (Mersehead, Dumfries and Galloway, 25 November 2007).** This bird was identified as Taverner's Cackling Goose, a form that breeds almost entirely in Alaska. According to Sibley (2000), it may intergrade with Lesser Canada Goose *B c parvipes* in central Alaska, but Mlodinow *et al* (2008) would appear to contradict this. It is similar to both Aleutian Cackling Goose *B h leucopareia* and Lesser Canada Goose *B c parvipes*, but its breast is slightly darker. Given its western breeding range, this would seem a highly unlikely vagrant here and its field identification on this side of the Atlantic would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to prove. Escapes are unlikely as it is apparently unknown here in captivity.

13



JOHN CARTER

**13 Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (Caerlaverock WWT, Dumfries and Galloway, 26 February 2004).** Again, note the small bill, short neck and square head. As this photograph shows, some nominate Cackling individuals have a fairly prominent white neck-ring, while others lack it altogether. There is also variation in the underpart colour, although paler birds are more usual.





14



ANDREW MOON

**14 Probable Ridgway's Cackling Goose *B h minima* (Stocker's Farm, Hertfordshire, 17 December 2013).** The form *minima* was the one originally known as 'Cackling Goose', the name now adopted for the entire species. It has a very limited breeding range in western Alaska and, given that fact, unless birds somehow find their way across the Arctic it must surely be regarded as a very unlikely vagrant to Britain. It is the smallest of the Cackling Geese, with a small bill, a short neck and a dark brown breast with a purplish sheen.

15



STEVE PERCIVAL

**15 Richardson's Cackling Goose *B h hutchinsii* (Islay, Argyll, 14 February 2010).** This photograph shows the relative size of *hutchinsii* Cackling Goose compared with the Barnacle Goose to its right. This bird is in fact slightly smaller than the Barnacle, but this may be related to its sex – like all geese, females average smaller than males. Even though the bird is feeding and is slightly turned away from the camera, it is still possible to make out the short bill, the rather square head and the short neck. Cackling Goose calls are a high-pitched yelping, distinctly different from the familiar trumpeting of *canadensis* Canada Geese.





# Find your own Canada and Cackling Geese

**THE** presence of so many feral **Canada Geese** and occasional escaped **Cackling Geese** in Britain and Ireland compound the difficulties of finding wild individuals of these two species. For such geese to stand a chance of being genuine vagrants, the western coasts in late autumn and early winter are best.

However, by now potential 'carrier species' will have settled down on the east coast, too, and it may be best not to dismiss the odd Cackling Goose that turns up in Norfolk or Northumberland in winter. With neither species yet accepted into Category A by the BOURC, any apparent vagrancy pattern is inevitably hearsay, but enough potentially wild birds have been found now to indicate likely areas worth searching.

Both the Irish Rare Birds Committee and the Northern Ireland Birdwatchers' Association

Records Committee have accepted Cackling and Canada Geese to Category A, and Ireland is arguably the best region to see them. The flocks of Barnacle Geese at Lissadell, Co Sligo (G 6344), often seem to produce Richardson's Cackling Goose, while Balygilgan NR (G 6443) and Raghly (G 5741) in the same county have also been known to turn up a bird. Doonbeg, Co Clare (Q 9665), is also worth checking, but it follows that any flock of Barnacle Goose is worth scoping to see what's present.

Any lone Canada Goose in the west of Ireland may also be worth a look, particularly if mixed with Barnacle Geese or Greenland White-fronted Geese, as the feral Canada population doesn't wander much to those parts.

North-west Scotland holds plenty of wintering Barnacle and Greenland White-fronted Geese,

and there is no reason to think that Cackling Geese found among them are more or less valid than the Irish birds. Loch Gruinart RSPB, Islay, Argyll (NR 2767), is a good shout, as is Caerlaverock WWT, Dumfries and Galloway (NY 0365), which has a proven track record for rare wildfowl.

On the east coast of Britain, it is Pink-footed Geese that are suspected of being the carriers of Cackling Geese, and the prime wintering areas for this species are the Northumberland and Yorkshire coasts and north Norfolk. In the last county, search the 'Pink-foot' flocks at Cley Marshes NWT (TG 0544), Holkham Freshmarsh (TF 8844), or anywhere else in this goose-rich region and see what you turn up. In Northumberland, East Chevington NWT (NZ 2698) and Budle Bay (NU 1536) have both turned up Richardson's Cackling

Geese in the recent past.

If you find a bird on its own or away from the hot-spots in Britain and Ireland, though, you'll have to assess the likelihood of it being wild yourself – don't expect the committees to accept it any time soon. ■

## FURTHER READING

**The North American Bird Guide**  
by David Sibley

This excellent field guide to the birds of North America covers Canada and Cackling Geese in great detail. It will add to your understanding of these two similar species, helping you identify them if you discover a candidate in Britain, as well as improve your understanding of all North American birds. This second edition features updated texts and improved images.

Buy for just £23, or £22 for subscribers; SRP £25.

To order see page 77, call 020 8881 0550 or visit the Birdwatch Bookshop at [www.birdwatch.co.uk/store](http://www.birdwatch.co.uk/store).

## Quiz bird



**EXPECT** the unexpected, they say. This could be sound advice indeed when it comes to goose-watching this winter, because flocks of commoner species frequently attract rarer hangers-on. The trouble is you just don't know where, when or what you might find – like this stand-out bird (centre) in a flock of wintering Barnacle Geese, photographed one

winter in south-west Scotland.

Scanning any goose gathering could conceivably produce such a find, but it's not much of a reward for your efforts if you can't identify it. In such a real-life scenario, you'd have to trawl the recesses of your field mark-filled mind, carefully assessing size, shape and coloration to reach a verdict. In a magazine quiz, the task is a little easier –

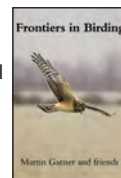
simply go back through Keith Vinicombe's advice-packed guide, review the photos and captions and let us know your conclusion.

### How to enter

Once you think you have the right answer, let us know the identity of the mystery goose in this photo. Go to [bit.ly/bw271GooseQuiz](http://bit.ly/bw271GooseQuiz), but be quick,

as the competition closes on 9 January. The answer will be available online at [www.birdwatch.co.uk/win](http://www.birdwatch.co.uk/win) from

12 January, and the first randomly chosen reader with the correct answer will win a copy of Martin Garner's *Frontiers in Birding*. ■





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We'll spend a day at Lake Mývatn, about 40 miles east of Akureyri. One of Iceland's largest lakes, it is famous for Barrow's Goldeneye and Harlequin Duck, both of which breed in Iceland but nowhere else in Europe. The surrounding area is also good for Gyr Falcon, and this will be another of our key targets.

On the morning of the final day, there will still be time to look for any missed species. We'll then leave for the harbour in Akureyri, where we board our ship and start our new adventure on the *Plancius*.

**■ This tour is operated for Birdwatch by Birding Breaks (registered with the Chamber of Commerce in Amsterdam under licence number 54226104). The price includes all accommodation and food on board ship on a full-board basis, as well as expert guiding. For further information, reservations and full details of the Iceland pre-tour and what's not included, please call the company on 0031 20 77 92 030 or email [info@birdingbreaks.nl](mailto:info@birdingbreaks.nl).**



GYR FALCON BY LAURENS STEIN



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Duck, Barrow's Goldeneye and Brünnich's Guillemot.

Other possible seabirds include Great, Pomarine, Arctic and Long-tailed Skuas, Sabine's Gull and Leach's Storm-petrel, and we'll keep a look out for shearwaters and anything unusual among the many other commoner seabirds. Several different species of whale and dolphin are also possible, as are passerine migrants which may take the opportunity to rest on board our ship. At night, if conditions are right, the *aurora borealis* (or Northern Lights) may illuminate the darkness with an ethereal green glow.

In a little over three days we'll have passed the scenic Faroe Islands and be well on the way to the legendary Fair Isle. Here, at the southernmost point of the Shetland Isles, we will land on day four and spend the entire day scouring the island for migrants. At this time of

the year Fair Isle is arguably at its finest, and rare migrants and vagrants are not uncommon. On a good day there is chance of scarcities such as Yellow-browed Warbler, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Common Rosefinch and Red-backed Shrike. We can hope for even better birds such as Lanceolated Warbler and Pechora Pipit. The seas that surround Fair Isle also offer good cetacean-watching opportunities.

We'll then sail south over the next two days through the North Sea, keeping an eye out en route for birds such as Red-throated Diver, Leach's Storm-petrel, Sooty and Manx Shearwaters and Arctic, Pomarine and Long-tailed Skuas, as well as the passerines and raptors that are sometimes lost at sea during this key migration time. On day seven our journey finally comes to an end in the Dutch port of Vlissingen.

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**M**y local patch is Greenwich Park and Blackheath in south-east London, a busy urban area of our capital city. As a non-driver, in recent years I've done most of my birding here. Working this unremarkable patch has its challenges, yet is still rewarding in many ways.

As with any public park, encounters with joggers, dog-walkers, kite-flyers, sports players, tourists and more are common, so wandering about with a scope and binoculars is likely to intrigue passers-by. People often stop to chat and, while this can interrupt the birding, I believe that being friendly and showing members of the public the wildlife is one of the patchworker's key responsibilities. It's always good to spread knowledge about and enthusiasm for birds – who knows, one day these people could become allies against a development threat.

### Watching the Waxwings

On one recent occasion, I faced a dilemma. I'd found a flock of feeding Waxwings – great! – but directly opposite a local school at home time – not so great. To look as non-shifty as possible I opted to stand openly in an obvious place with my back to the school and watch the birds for a little while. A steady stream of parents and teachers began asking me what I was doing, and soon I had gathered an enthusiastic Waxwing-watching group and they even asked me to write something for

**A local park in an urban setting might not sound like the most exciting of patches but, says *Joe Beale*, the birding can still be rewarding, while offering a unique opportunity to interest others in wildlife and contribute to local conservation.**



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)



**Above:** a party of feeding Waxwings during a recent winter provided the unique opportunity to talk to parents, children and teachers from a local school about the birds in the area.

**Left:** a female Northern Shoveler might not attract a second look at many local patches, but this one was just the second to grace Greenwich Park and Blackheath since 1966.

the school newsletter. My photos and story about the birds went into the next issue. So: Waxwings watched, school staff and parents happy, and hopefully an increased awareness of wildlife for lots of schoolkids – a pretty satisfactory, if unplanned, result all round.

One unavoidable downside is background noise. Traffic, barking dogs, squawking parakeet flocks, events, processions of planes and circling helicopters all make it a real challenge to pick out the faint calls of a migrating pipit. Inevitably there are also dull times when I look on enviously at the hordes of scarcities that other London sites seem to attract. However, one of the upsides of a patch like this is that you learn to appreciate those 'ordinary' species that you might otherwise overlook in the quest for something more exciting. Getting a really close

JOE BEALE





Spotted Flycatcher sadly no longer breeds in Greenwich Park; these days it is an uncommon passage migrant.

JIM ALMOND (WWW.SHROPSHIREBIRDER.CO.UK)

view of, say, Goldcrests having a crown-baring scrap, oblivious to your presence, can really make your day and you notice how simply beautiful these birds are.

### Less spotted

Regular patchwatching produces useful data on population trends over time. This information, when sent to a local bird recorder, helps create a broad overview of different species' changing fortunes. We know that Spotted Flycatcher was a staple summer visitor well into the 'Noughties', with up to three breeding pairs in Greenwich Park, yet these days it is only a passage migrant in small numbers here. This decline reflects a wider situation, according to the *London Bird Report 2012*,

with just six breeding pairs remaining in the whole London recording area.

Also lost locally and declining nationally is Lesser Spotted Woodpecker. This beautiful species was regularly seen until about 2007. House Sparrows were found around the buildings within the park until a well-publicised national decline. Happily, regular watching has identified stable populations along the park border and in Blackheath. And in 15 years Yellow Wagtail has sadly gone from being a fairly regular migrant, even occasionally stopping by in small flocks, to its present-day status as an uncommon fly-over, reflecting its national decline.

It's not all doom and gloom, though. If you had said to me as a teenager (not that long ago – the 1990s) that Red Kite,

Common Buzzard and Peregrine Falcon would be regular overhead within a decade I wouldn't have believed you, yet this has proved to be the case. The dramatic increase in noisy non-native Ring-necked Parakeets within the same period is perhaps less welcome. On a more local level, Jackdaw returned in the 1990s after a long absence, while Blackcaps are thriving and Chaffinch has become a common breeding bird.

It might not be the place to go to if you seek Yanks and Sibes, but almost anything is possible, and Ring-billed Gull and overflying Richard's Pipit have occurred within the last decade. Recent scarcities include Osprey and Marsh Harrier, and the 2013 Long-tailed Duck of unknown origin which landed on the

MORIO (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)



Located in the heart of south-east London, just across the Thames from the skyscrapers of Canary Wharf, Greenwich Park might not be the most obvious of local patches, but that's what makes birding there all the more rewarding.







minuscule park pond during its tour of south London.

Firecrest is annual on passage and overwintered for several years, while Ring Ouzel, Common Redstart and Pied Flycatcher turn up most years and there are occasional Hawfinches. For an inland spot with practically no standing water, Brent Goose (several flocks overhead), Sandwich Tern and Kittiwake have been recent local highlights, as was the incongruous sight of 10 Black-tailed Godwits grounded on Blackheath by a thunderstorm some years back. Vis-migging sometimes sees hundreds of Fieldfares or Chaffinches moving though, and 2,100 Redwings headed over one freezing February morning.

There are also the birds that delight the local birder but would scarcely merit a second glance elsewhere. A glorious vision on an icy pond, with big orange feet, glistening lamellae and oversized bill, the park's second Northern Shoveler since 1966 was a female that arrived during a recent cold snap. It may surprise you to hear that this sighting remains one of my favourite birding moments. That's what I mean about appreciating the common stuff.



JOE BEALE

**Above: the park and heath have also attracted scarcities such as Richard's Pipit.**

**Left: teaching members of the public about their local wildlife, like Green Woodpecker, is one of the joys of birding an urban patch.**



Reflecting an upturn in numbers across Britain, Red Kite is now a regular sight over the park.

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

### Saving species

Personal interest aside, your patch efforts can have direct local conservation implications. A bird report is a great way to reach out to the local community, while guided walks often prove popular and are another way of showing people what's in their neighbourhood. Who wouldn't enjoy showing someone a Green Woodpecker or Tawny Owl for the first time?

Maintaining good relations with local management or landowners means you can provide them with data to help guide decisions. When management plans to cut back trees and scrub, for example, they can act appropriately once they know what species might be affected. It's constructive to give credit where it's due; for example, Common Whitethroats recently bred successfully in Greenwich Park, the first such record in living memory, right in the middle of an area deliberately managed for wildlife. This news was passed on to those in charge. What better vindication of the park team's enlightened efforts? Good, constructive communication with the relevant management can help ensure wildlife doesn't lose out.

Even if your patch is ordinary and busy, it can still provide plenty of great moments. More importantly, you have the chance to contribute directly to conservation and help spread the word to the wider public. ■

STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)



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# Heard mentality

Seeing is believing, but what about hearing? While every birder counts the species they see, 'heard-only' encounters are not so straightforward – some see no difference, but others never count them. **Chris Harbard** looks at the arguments for and against ticking the unseen.



DAVID KJAER (WWW.DAVIDKJAER.COM)

Corncrake (above) is very secretive, spending much of its time hidden in iris beds (below) or other similar habitat, its presence only betrayed by the rasping call.



ROBIN CHITTENDEN (WWW.ROBINCHITTENDEN.CO.UK)

**M**ost birders keep lists of one sort or another. Whether life, year, country, county, patch or garden lists, adding birds to any of them is all part of the fun of birding. But while a matter of personal choice, how easy is it to judge what you should and shouldn't 'count'? Clearly, anything admitted onto a list must be acceptable in terms of identification and origin, but what one birder is prepared to add to their list may be deemed inadmissible by another.

## The problem in practice

Picture the scene: you are birding near a field of tall vegetation, from which comes the grating and unmistakable call of a Corncrake. After waiting for three hours

listening to it, you leave without sight of what would have been a life bird, yet you know it was there, just as surely as if you had seen it. Why not count it? The same scenario could apply equally to Common Quail, another shy and retiring species of farmland and open country, yet one which is highly vocal and most likely to be detected by its voice.

Wetland habitats have their own suite of secretive species which are more likely to be heard than seen. Currently treated as an official rarity and always a very rare breeding bird, Savi's Warbler may often remain unseen deep in a reedbed, with its reeling song the only evidence of its presence. Similarly, the retiring Bittern is far more likely to be detected by its muffled territorial 'booming' than by sight in its dense reedbed habitat.

When looking at countability criteria, the birding world can be broadly split into those who count 'heard-only' birds and those who think that only seeing a species makes it 'tickable'. So why not



For some species, vocalisations may be critical to identification. Western Bonelli's (below) and Eastern Bonelli's (right) Warblers are notoriously difficult to separate in the field, unless they are heard.



JIM NICOLSON



REBECCA NASON (WWW.REBECCANASON.COM)

count birds on song or call? There are, after all, species which even when seen well can be difficult to identify with certainty. Western Bonelli's and Eastern Bonelli's Warblers look very similar and are best distinguished by their differing call notes, and even Marsh and Willow Tits can be difficult to tell apart unless heard to sing or call. So if calls and songs play such a vital role in identification of some species, then surely it makes sense to count heard-only birds?

### For and against

Birders who keep lists tend to be very particular about what can be counted and when. For many, a new species for

the life list must be seen before being added. Then, once seen, the species can be added to subsequent lists such as annual or national lists, whether seen or heard. It would be unusual (though it does happen) for a 'lifer' to be added as a heard-only record.

One argument often used against counting a heard species is that there are some very good mimics in the bird world, and so hearing a particular call or song may not be sure-fire evidence of the bird's presence. Then there is the often widespread practice of 'tape-luring', using a recording of a bird to attract it. This is perhaps the origin of the apocryphal tale of two birders each playing a recording of the same bird, and

each thinking they have heard a response.

On the other hand, the desire to see birds, rather than simply hear them, can potentially cause problems. At one time British birders might have used a rope dragged over the top of a grass field to flush a calling Common Quail, or walk into a hay field to try to see a Corncrake. With stronger legal protection, and perhaps a higher level of birding ethics, this no longer happens at home, but it was antics like this that led the American Birding Association (ABA) to change its rules in 1994 to allow heard birds to be counted.

It cited the stress that could be suffered by species like Yellow Rail, which were often flushed from their grassland habitat, or owls and nightjars which were subjected to examination with bright torches, as the reason. The ABA's recording rules for life lists now state that "Diagnostic field marks for the bird, sufficient to identify to species, must have been seen and/or heard and/or documented by the recorder".

But such listing rules do not meet with universal approval. David Fisher, world birder and bird sound recordist, makes his view very clear: "Basically, I'm a birdwatcher, not a bird listener. For me hearing a species is nowhere near as satisfying as seeing it – that is what motivates me. I still keep a record of all the birds which I hear and don't see, both in my daily notes and in my various lists, but for publication purposes my totals are always of birds seen and I do not include the heard-only species."

### Debate continues

Whether or not heard-only birds should be counted has been the subject of an ongoing debate for some time, and it is accepted among many birders that it should be very much a personal



GARY THOBURN

A rare breeding bird in Britain's reedbeds, Savi's Warbler is often heard before it is seen, and requires much patience to observe well. Its song is similar to the more widespread Grasshopper Warbler, so can heard-only individuals be reliably counted?



decision. Across the Atlantic, American birders tend to be more accepting of the idea – among the top 100 ABA listers about 55 per cent count heard-only birds. This might be because there are more instances where bird sounds are the only means of identification. In North America, many nocturnally migrating songbirds vocalise in flight, and can often be found migrating at a low level, enabling them to be identified by call, while otherwise being invisible to the birder. Identifying them like this takes considerable skill using recording equipment and sonograms, and there's even an online forum to help with more difficult species.

Ted Floyd, Editor of the ABA's magazine *Birding*, is an avid supporter of counting heard birds: "When you think about it, everything we experience is just that: an experience, an impression, reality through the filter of our senses, brains and hearts. A tiny amount of electromagnetic radiation excites the photoreceptors in our eyes, and our brains turn that signal into the experience of seeing a bird. Equivalently, a few air molecules jostle about in the vicinity of the cochlea of our ears, and our brains convert that small pressure differential into the experience of hearing a bird ... the two experiences are on a perfectly equal footing. Energy – in the form of a 'signal' – is transmitted from a source (the bird) to a receiver (the birder), and we declare it to be real. Whether the signal is visual or auditory seems irrelevant to me."

However, one of the founders of the ABA, the late Arnold Small, was equally vehement about not counting heard birds, claiming "A bird noise, however pleasing, is not a bird, it is a disembodied sound". A look at listing website Bubo ([www.bubo.org](http://www.bubo.org)) shows many listers from Britain do not count heard birds, and – notably – top world listers Tom Gullick and Jon Hornbuckle, both with more than 9,000 species to their names, don't do so.

### What would you do?

So you're on your first foreign birding trip to South America, which has involved a great deal of planning, expense and effort. Once there, none of the bird sounds you can hear are remotely familiar, but you have a local guide with you. He tells you he has heard the call of an uncommon foliage-gleaner in a mixed flock, high in the canopy. As you strain to see it, a brown bird flits into

**Common Quail is a shy species of farmland and open country, its cryptic plumage making it hard to see in its chosen habitat, but its call is very distinctive.**



ARIE OUVKEREK (WWW.AGAMI.NL)

**Connecticut Warbler is a shy species that usually spend its time foraging within dense vegetation. Such behaviour often renders it difficult to see well.**



MATT TILLET (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

**Lineated Foliage-gleaner is a skulking denizen of dense cloud forest. Its presence is typically given away by its loud, scratchy chatter.**



DAVID A RODRIGUEZ ARIAS (WWW.FLICKR.COM)



With its plumage perfectly patterned to disguise it in its reedbed habitat (below), Bittern is often hard to see, and can be much more easily located by its distinctive booming call.

view and disappears – it was the foliage-gleaner, your guide declares. While you saw the bird and know it to be a foliage-gleaner, you just didn't quite see the plumage feature that would clinch its ID as that species. Your guide, however, is adamant that he knows what it is from the call. Do you count it or do you relegate it to a 'guide-only' list, even though you're sure you saw the bird?

This dilemma is not an uncommon one and is another situation where one's own personal preferences come into play – some will count it while others won't. The ABA's listing rules once again make this clear for the organisation's members: "The recorder's identification is not valid if it is based on characteristics seen, heard or recognised by another person but not by the recorder, or if the recorder does not recognise the characteristics seen or heard as being uniquely distinctive to the particular species."

There is no such 'governing body' in British birding to recommend what to count and what to ignore. Some birders do note everything, but keep lists which clearly separate heard-only sightings so that they can make fair comparisons with other birders' lists.

It is whatever gives you pleasure that matters, and some might argue why would one ignore a heard bird when many species can be said to sound a lot better than they actually look. As birders use optical equipment to magnify their visual experience of birds, enabling identifications that would be impossible with the naked eye, then perhaps they could use auditory equipment to amplify their aural experience, and so be able to hear birds vocalising from half a mile away – who knows what might be counted then! ■

RICHARD BROOKS (WWW.RICHARD-BROOKS.CO.UK)



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# MARK AVERY

## Forward and back

2014 may well turn out to be the year of the Hen Harrier, but with an election looming, what will 2015 mean for Britain's wildlife? **Mark Avery** is in reflective mood.

**J**anuary, named after the two-faced Roman god Janus (patron saint of grouse shooters?), is a time for looking backwards at the last year and forward to the next.

As far as birding is concerned, for me 2014 was an unspectacular year. My garden was quite good, with three additions to its (15-year-old) list: Common Chiffchaff (singing on 8 April, with a second on 11 September), Common Cuckoo in May and Goshawk over in August, as well as a late Common Swift on 9 September. I also added Whinchat to my patch list at Stanwick Lakes in September. However, I didn't see Little Owl all year (is it me, or is it them?) and my one Northamptonshire attempted twitch (Dotterel) was a failure, but did result in me seeing my biggest-ever flock of Stock Doves (173 birds). As you can see, I don't get out much!

Maybe 2015 will be different, with hordes of rarities popping into my garden and my home county being lauded as the new Fair Isle because of its long, spectacular run of high-quality finds, all at Stanwick Lakes and all found by me and confirmed by better birders who remain impressed by my obvious skills and dedication. Or maybe it won't.

I did see a Hen Harrier at Stanwick Lakes in March, and 2014 may be seen as an important year in the fortunes of that bird. In England there were four pairs, a doubling of numbers since 2013, but still a long way below the potential breeding population of 330 pairs which the current science says is feasible. On Hen Harrier Day, 10 August, 570 of us stood in torrential rain in the Peak District, and hundreds gathered in other spots too, to protest against the illegal killing of this species. It felt like a turning point, like birders raising their voices. It felt great!

### The year ahead

Will 2015 see the criminal elements in the grouse-shooting industry bow to public pressure and cease their persecution of Hen Harrier? We'll see. Sadly, there appears to be precious little peer pressure on them from within the shooting community. Their efforts seem to be restricted to attacking the RSPB



RICHARD BROOKS (WWW.RICHARD-BROOKS.CO.UK)  
INSET: HIERONYMUS (WWW.FLICKR.COM)

**The Roman god Janus (inset) looks to the past – remembering a Whinchat on the patch in 2014 – and to the future, and wondering what 2015 will bring for wildlife.**

“Will 2015 see the criminal elements in the grouse-shooting industry bow to public pressure and cease their illegal persecution of Hen Harrier?”

and others for making a stand against wildlife crime. Grouse shooting had a year of public relations disasters and will be glad to see the back of 2014. The Romans threw open the doors of the temples of Janus in wartime and closed them when peace resumed; they have been open for much of 2014.

For any political birder, 2015 looks like it could be an exciting year, with a general election in May. Looking back, it is difficult to identify many politicians whom we should praise for their work for wildlife, but Zac Goldsmith (Con, Richmond Park), Sir John Randall (Con, Uxbridge and South Ruislip, and standing down in 2015) and the incomparable Caroline Lucas (Green, Brighton Pavilion, whose seat is vulnerable in May) are the pick of the bunch. Shadow Environment Minister Barry Gardiner (Lab, Brent) was present in the Peak District on Hen Harrier Day. But the political landscape is uncertain after 7 May. What is on Nigel Farage's life list, I wonder? ■



### Do this in January

- Make sure you are registered to vote and start thinking about what you really believe in ahead of 7 May.
- Save the date of 9 August 2015 for Hen Harrier Day – I hope the weather will be better than last year.
- And do have a happy and bird-rich 2015!



# Europe's enemy within

The EU's directives to preserve wildlife are an important part of conservation, helping to shield birds and habitats across Europe, but they are coming under fire, says RSPB Chief Executive **Mike Clarke**. The organisation will be fighting to safeguard them, and it wants your help.

Amber Listed as a Species of Conservation Concern in the UK, Dartford Warbler has benefited from species protection afforded by the EU Birds Directive.



BEN HALL (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)



Just a couple of months ago nature was on the move – Swallows, salmon, eels and Painted Ladies were all migrating. Huge waves of Scandinavian thrushes came pouring across Britain's east coast, while Rough-legged Buzzards could be seen from East Anglia to north-east England. Stepping outside in the evening, it was possible to hear passing birds calling through the traffic noise of central London. This is the magic of migration.

Since the turn of the 20th century, conservationists on both sides of the Atlantic – including the RSPB – have recognised the need for common protection of the refuges that provide vital stepping stones along migration routes. We need to work together to help our wildlife, just as we do if we want clean air and water.

We know nature is in trouble, with growing threats from building developments and the way land is managed, to neonicotinoid pesticides and illegal persecution. Thankfully, the picture has not been all bad. Some species, such as Red Kite and White-tailed Eagle, are returning to our skies after decades of absence. Others, like Corncrake and Bittern, have been brought back from the brink of extinction, helped by crofters,

farmers and landowners, as well as on nature reserves.

This has not happened by accident. We have effective tools for nature conservation at the ecological scale nature needs, thanks to European co-operation. On its own, Britain had no incentive to do the right thing, and nor did other governments.

## National failure

When we only had UK laws to protect nature, it was a race to the bottom. The question was not whether a species would decline or a site be damaged, but when. In the 1970s, 10 per cent of our best wildlife sites (our Sites of Special Scientific Interest, or SSSIs) were being damaged, and in some cases destroyed – every year. The European Union's two directives for nature were created to prevent any one member state from gaining a competitive advantage by trashing their environment. And this principle is more important today than ever before.

A current case echoes these 'bad old days'. Lodge Hill in Kent is an SSSI, designated by Natural England for a breeding population of Nightingales of national importance. Numbers of this iconic species have halved across

the UK in a little more than a decade. But Medway council has approved a housing development that will destroy 144 ha – one of the largest losses of an SSSI since the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act. Lodge Hill is protected, but only under national law.

The Birds Directive was adopted in 1979, because of worrying declines and unsustainable use of some bird species and the demonstrable failure of nation states to address these. It provides a legal framework to conserve all birds across the EU, including the establishment of Special Protection Areas (SPAs). Highly threatened birds and migratory species are given additional protection.

The Habitats Directive, adopted in 1992, complements the Birds Directive with measures that apply to other special wildlife and habitats, including the protection of Special Areas of Conservation (SACs).

Between them these directives represent the backbone of conservation action across Europe. They form the Natura 2000 network of protected sites (comprising SPAs and SACs), providing nature's ark across Europe, and holding our wildlife crown jewels in places from north Norfolk and the Cairngorms to the Coto Doñana and Danube Delta.





**Left:** the RSPB's Hope Farm in Cambridgeshire is proof that profitable agriculture and habitat protection can co-exist. The organisation has reported that crop yields have stayed competitive while numbers of farmland birds have tripled – bucking a national trend.

**Below:** numbers of Nightingales are declining in the UK, but that hasn't stopped Medway Council approving a development on Lodge Hill, an SSSI that is home to a nationally important breeding population of this species. Such species and habitats cannot be replaced by simple mitigation measures.



Marshes SPA for development, the RSPB objected to the European Court of Justice. The outcome was successful and the decision was reversed on the basis that economic considerations should not be taken into account in the designation process.

By that time the mudflat habitats had been destroyed. Game over? No, because the compensation requirements of the Birds Directive and Habitats Directive kicked in. The government was required to compensate for the habitat loss in order to, in the formal words of the

We know that, when these directives work properly, they are Britain's best conservation tools. Scientific evidence has shown that birds fare better given special protection by the Birds Directive and where sites have been designated for them, compared to being outside the network of sites. Specially protected birds that have benefited from the Bird Directive's measures include Bittern, White-tailed Eagle, Red Kite, Corncrake, Dartford Warbler, Avocet, Black Grouse and Stone-curlew. This is despite the fact that implementation in Britain and elsewhere remains far from complete and investment in conservation action is woefully inadequate. The conclusion is simple: effective implementation can make a real difference to the future of nature.

We also know that the protection they provide for our most important wildlife sites is far more effective than that provided under national laws. But the nature directives do not ignore the other needs of people. Within Natura 2000 sites, development and

land management proposals must be properly assessed, with damaging proposals only allowed for "imperative reasons of overriding public interest". In such cases, there needs to be no less damaging alternatives – by developing in a different location, for example – and compensation is required, usually in the form of land equivalent to the habitat that will be lost. In practice, this means that damaging developments in these areas is now rare and that losses are made good to ensure that wildlife does not suffer as a result.

### Getting it right

Compare and contrast the situation at Lodge Hill with that of Lappel Bank, a mudflat on the Medway Estuary that supported significant numbers of Shelduck, Ringed and Grey Plovers, Dunlin and Common Redshank. When the then Secretary of State for the Environment proposed excluding Lappel Bank from the Medway Estuary and

The Wild Coast project at Wallasea Island RSPB, Essex, is a landmark scheme to recreate an ancient wetland landscape to protect against climate change and coastal flooding; the reserve was created as part of mitigation measures after the destruction of habitat at Lappel Bank, Kent.





directives, “maintain the coherence of the Natura 2000 network”. The first phase of habitat creation at Wallasea Island on the Essex coast was the result.

Come down a level to places which are of national importance – our SSSIs – and, in England at least, the situation is more worrying. Lodge Hill and its Nightingales are protected at the moment under guidelines in the National Planning Policy Framework. This should mean, at the very minimum, that proposals to build houses on the site are tested at a public inquiry – but there is no certainty that this will be the case and no guarantee, if worst came to worst, of effective compensation. And if Lodge Hill falls, no SSSI is safe.

### Burden on business

The value to nature of the EU directives, and the fact that they are legally binding, has not endeared them to those who seem to consider nature an unimportant obstacle. In 2011 Chancellor George Osborne launched a review of Birds and Habitats Directives implementation, claiming that they placed an unnecessary burden on development and growth, that their implementation was being ‘gold-plated’, and that they were imposing ‘ridiculous costs’ on British businesses.



Medway Estuary and Marshes is an SPA and RAMSAR site that holds internationally important populations of wintering and passage birds; it was the local council's failure to include Lappel Bank within this site – and the subsequent destruction of this mudflat for development – that led to the creation of Wallasea Island RSPB.

ROLF WILLIAMS (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)



ANDY HAY (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)

Stone-curlew is afforded special protection under the EU Birds Directive. Sites where the species is found are designated as Environmentally Sensitive Areas.

Although this review concluded on the basis of the best available evidence that the directives are not a block to development and that implementation is not gold plated, the pressure to change and weaken them has, if anything, intensified.

Last year, the European Commission launched a process, called a Fitness Check, to assess the effectiveness of these directives and their “burden on business”. On its own, this is cause for serious concern, but the announcement in September 2014 of the structure and objectives of the new European Commission, which is renewed after every European election, should set everyone’s alarm bells ringing.

Responsibility for overseeing this Fitness Check and for deciding how best to respond to its findings has been placed in the hands of the new Environment and Fisheries Commissioner, Mr Karmenu Vella from Malta, a country whose politicians have a reputation for paying scant regard to Europe’s nature laws (in particular the Birds Directive). On top of that, Mr Vella has been instructed by his boss, Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, to review potential for merging





CHRIS GOMERSALL (WWW.RSPB-IMAGES.COM)



From 1800 to 1970, White-tailed Eagles suffered dramatic declines in most of Europe, including Britain and Ireland. Special EU protection and extensive reintroduction programmes brought the species back to many parts of the continent, including Scotland where it is now re-established.



CORRECTPROFILE (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)



FACTIO POPULARIS EUROPAEA (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

**Environment and Fisheries Commissioner Karmenu Vella (far left) and Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker (left) want to 'modernise' the Birds and Habitats Directives; the RSPB will be working to ensure this doesn't mean a weakening of important legislation.**

the directives into a "more modern piece of legislation".

This detailed instruction suggests that, for the new Commission, the outcome of the Fitness Check is a foregone conclusion. Whatever it may say, Mr Vella has been asked to change the best nature legislation we have – and experience suggests that 'modernise' means weaken.

### Hard task

Conserving nature has never been easy, but without the Birds and Habitats Directives it is likely to prove far harder. The battle to demonstrate to Mr Vella and Mr Juncker why downgrading European-wide legal protection for

nature would be such a bad idea is one nature cannot afford to lose.

We know that many companies value the business certainty that the directives provide across Europe. Consistent standards and procedures apply in all 28 member states. Smart businesses want clear and consistent implementation – they do not want policy uncertainty caused by 'moving the goal posts'. Leading businesses, including multinationals such as CEMEX and Heidelberg Cement, have made this clear.

We also know that citizens, not just in Britain but across Europe, think nature is important. Indeed a recent Europe-wide poll confirmed that 95 per cent of people think the environment is

personally important to them.

The challenge is to make sure that Mr Vella and Mr Juncker, and politicians across Europe, also realise just how effective, efficient and popular the directives are when it comes to saving nature. The stakes are high; with the directives properly implemented there is a fighting chance not only that nature can survive but that we can reverse past losses. If they are weakened the future is unpredictable and bleak for Europe's wildlife. ■

### HOW YOU CAN GET INVOLVED

**OVER** the next 12 months, the RSPB will be working hard to protect the Birds and Habitats Directives and it could really do with your help. If you agree that the laws that protect nature should themselves be protected, here's some things you can do that will make a difference:

- Write to your MP and ask what they will be doing to ensure the directives' safety.
- As the Regulatory Fitness and Performance Programme (REFIT) process gets underway, there will be opportunities for European citizens to have their say via an internet consultation, and the RSPB will be working with other NGOs in Britain and across Europe to ensure that the voices of all those who want to protect the laws that protect nature can be heard.

For more information visit [www.rspb.org.uk](http://www.rspb.org.uk).





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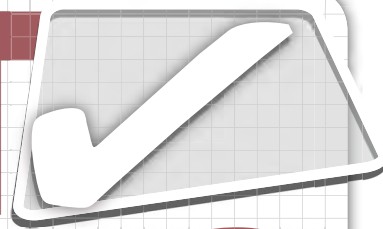
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# EXPERT REVIEWS



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## Travelling light

With 'travelscopes' gaining popularity among birders, **Mike Alibone** takes a look at the latest 50 mm offering from Viking.

### REVIEW

#### Viking 50 mm ED Pro telescope

**LOOK** around and it doesn't take too long to discover there are surprisingly few compact telescopes available to the birder who aspires to travel light. With the launch at last August's Birdfair of the 50 mm ED Pro, Viking Optical has now entered the 'travelscope' market, widening the choice of models

in a sector which appears to be enjoying increasing popularity.

I indulged in some early winter testing of this new model, which is now the 'baby' in the company's premium ED Pro telescope range, complementing the 65 mm and 80 mm models. Unlike those, however, the focusing system is a top-mounted, fast/fine, dual split wheel

which is integrated neatly into the body of the telescope. The latter is constructed with light magnesium alloy and, at 750 g, weighs no more than many binoculars.

Only the objective lens hood is rubber armoured, and it extends smoothly with virtually no resistance – in fact it's so loose fitting I was able to fully extend

it simply with a single shake of the scope's body. The rubber lens cover supplied with the model fits snugly and securely into the end of the body, keeping the hood in the fully retracted position; it is not possible to attach the cover when the hood is extended, even minimally. By contrast, the lens cap for the eyepiece fits very loosely and is prone to falling off.

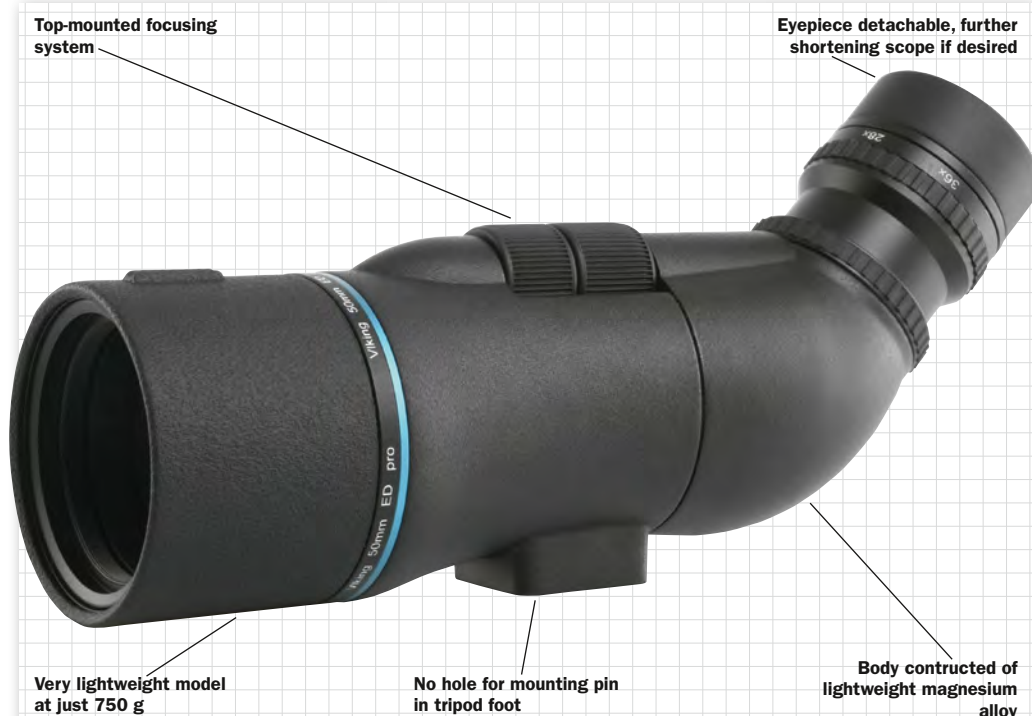
Nevertheless, the package comes across as a robust, 'up-to-the-job' piece of kit which I would feel comfortable with slinging into a light travel bag or swinging around in the deep pocket of an overcoat.

#### Eyepiece and zoom design

The eyepiece is detachable, accounting for approximately 15 per cent of the model's overall length, and this allows the scope to be further shortened for travel or storage if desired. It is not bayonet fitted, and secure engagement is achieved through the tightening of a rubber-covered, milled ring at the proximal end of the eyepiece. The many turns of this ring ensure solid attachment and provide a seal against the elements.

A similarly proportioned ring is employed to operate the 12-36x zoom, which is clearly marked out in increments of 8x. The soft rubber-covered eyecup extends and loosely locks at three levels above the fully retracted position, although there appears to be very little difference between the fully extended and the penultimate positions. Unfortunately, I was not able to see the full field of view at the highest magnification setting when the eyecup was fully extended.

I found focusing very easy using the split-ring mechanism. Both





## 72 January challenge

Winter is truly upon us, so Steve Young wants to see your best shots of birds in snow this month.

## 73 Bag it

Could Lowepro's new photographic bags solve your camera-carrying concerns?

## 73 List of lists

Bird Journal's comprehensive app and online service means you can take all your lists everywhere.

## 74 The name game

A fascinating look into the history of scientific nomenclature.

## 75 Photo finish

Two new photographic guides look in detail at hornbills and the birds of Australia respectively.

## 76 A year of birds

Now in its 35th edition, *The Birdwatcher's Yearbook 2015* has everything you need to plan your year ahead.

## THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL



**MIKE ALIBONE** is *Birdwatch*'s Optics Editor. He has been testing binoculars and telescopes for more than a decade.



**DOMINIC MITCHELL** is *Birdwatch*'s founder and Managing Editor. He has been birding in Britain and abroad for more than 40 years.



**STEVE YOUNG** is Photographic Consultant for *Birdwatch* and an award-winning wildlife photographer.



**WINCEY WILLIS** was a well-known weather presenter on *TV-am*, but she is also a birder and conservationist.



**ALAN TILMOUTH** is a Northumberland-based birder who has had a passion for wildlife since childhood.



**ROB HUME** began watching birds as a child. He worked for the RSPB for many years and has written several books.

## Did you know?

**THE** exit pupil of a telescope or binocular is the diameter in millimetres of the beam of light which is the image of the objective lens delivered to the eye by the eyepiece. Its value is calculated by dividing objective lens diameter by the magnification of the optic. The exit pupil for 8x42 binoculars, for example, is 5.25. The higher this value is, the brighter the image will be – assuming the pupil of the eye is large enough to accommodate it.

rings are approximately one finger's width and turn very smoothly, with the one nearest to the eyepiece producing the initial fast focus, while the distal ring fine-tunes the image. There is a pleasing amount of tolerance in the fine-tuning ring – it is not overly sensitive and it is quite easy to achieve a sharply focused image without experiencing the frustration of continual micro-adjustment.

### Image quality

Once focused, the image rendering is cold to neutral, delivering fine, natural colours with a good degree of contrast. There is some minor chromatic aberration and it is largely sharp, although there is a little peripheral softening in an estimated 10-15 per cent of the field. However, this is virtually unnoticeable and did not detract from my enjoyment of watching my first Smew of the winter on one of my local gravel pits, during one of the fresher days of early December. It looked great through this small scope! I would have welcomed a fraction more brightness at full magnification, but with a 50 mm objective at 36x, the exit pupil is always going to be low.

While it is, of course, possible to hand-hold the 50 mm ED Pro, like full-sized telescopes it is better mounted on a tripod, although it's worth noting that

the tripod foot does not include a hole for a mounting pin, which means there is potential for the scope to rotate or work loose on the head of any tripod to which it is attached. However, this is less likely to occur than with a full-sized telescope, as there is both less weight and a shorter length, resulting in lower torque when the tripod is being carried around.

The 50 mm ED Pro comes with a protective stay-on case with a clip attachment.

For those in the market for a travelscope or simply a small telescope which is not a burden to carry around, this model represents good value for money and is clearly worthy of serious consideration. ■

### Further info

- **Price:** £219
- **Length:** 245 mm (including eyepiece)
- **Weight:** 750g
- **Field of view:** 7-30 m at 1,000 m
- **Light transmission:** not available
- **Close focus:** 7 m (at 12x magnification)
- **Gas-filled:** yes
- **Waterproof:** yes
- **Guarantee:** 5 years

### Verdict

- ✓ Image is sharp across most of the field
- ✓ Delivers fine, natural colours
- ✗ Full field of view not visible at highest magnification when eyecup fully extended

## Deterrent fails to deter

### REVIEW

## Solar Pest Repeller



I am at war in my garden. Grey Squirrels have besieged my bird feeders, and each time I put out food for the birds they are first on the scene, hoovering up ground mixes and swinging from seed feeders which lack suitable defences. It was time to take action.

Initially, I had high hopes for the Solar Pest Repeller. A compact, solar-charged unit, it uses a PIR motion sensor to detect the presence of an animal within range, and then emits an ultrasonic frequency which is adjustable between 15-25 kHz, depending on which particular pest you want to deal with (the manufacturers claim it can repel "cats, dogs, foxes, rats, mice (sic), squirrels and deer").

I followed the simple instructions to the letter when installing it in my garden, attaching the unit to a three-section plastic spike (it can also be wall mounted). It was positioned on the edge of a border in full, direct sunlight so that the rechargeable batteries could be constantly topped up via the top-mounted solar panel. The unit can also be recharged using a mains power adapter, yet bizarrely this is not included in the kit and has to be bought separately.

Once my unit was fully charged, I put out some seed

on the lawn and waited. A familiar mix of my regular garden birds soon appeared, mainly Woodpigeons and Chaffinches, and – to my surprise and annoyance – they were quickly followed by a Grey Squirrel. It was distant at first, so I expected it to begin reacting as it came closer to the unit, which claims a motion sensor activation range of up to 30 ft (more than adequate for my small garden). Unfortunately this never happened, and over the next couple of days one or two squirrels regularly fed within inches of the unit, stuffing their ample cheeks with bird food.

I experimented with other settings on the crude gauge on the underside of the unit (which according to the instructions can even be adjusted to deter teenagers!), but it made no difference. After several days of failing to deter squirrels, reluctantly I removed the Solar Pest Repeller and returned it to the retailer, Good Ideas. Irritatingly, despite not being fit for purpose, the returns label required the disappointed buyer to pay postage to send it back – not such a good idea.

Meanwhile, the hunt for an effective deterrent for squirrels goes on. **Dominic Mitchell**

**MORE INFO** Price: £24.99 • Weight: 730 g • From: Good Ideas • bit.ly/bw271SolarRepeller



## STEVE YOUNG'S PHOTO CHALLENGE

# Winter



Try visiting a reedbed nature reserve, where cold weather could result in elusive species such as Water Rail leaving the safety of the reeds to search for food, running across the ice as they do.

Snow changes landscapes dramatically; even this ivy-covered garden wall looks so much better with its covering of white.



If you have a feeding station or garden with Goldfinches visiting, try setting up teasels ready for a frosty day – they make great perches.



**FOR** those photographers hardy enough to brave the cold, the depths of winter bring chilly spells that offer the opportunity to get out and take gorgeous seasonal shots of birds in frost or snow – and that is the photo challenge this month.

It couldn't be simpler: just send me your best images that say 'birds in winter' – and also look really attractive as a photo. By this I mean a Blue Tit in a leafless tree is clearly a winter shot, but it isn't going to win the prize!

I'll be looking for birds in snow or on frosty branches, birds as part of a snowy landscape or on an icy pond or lake. If you have a garden, keep your feeders well stocked, as many species will be around in

hard weather looking for easy food. You can also visit a local park, where species such as Blackbird can be brought closer by putting down some apples.

Nature reserves with reedbeds can provide a wider variety of species and there may be a chance of taking shots of a Water Rail feeding on the frozen edges, or even a Bittern walking across the snow. Who knows what you'll see until you get out and about with your camera – good luck!

• **Turn to page 93 to find out who won the November Tufted Duck photo challenge.**



# In the bag

## REVIEW

### Lowepro Nova Sport 7L and 17L AW camera bags

**HOW** to transport all your camera equipment in the field is an eternal conundrum. The new range of three camera bags from Lowepro could, however, offer a good solution, depending on how much you want to carry. With 7, 17 and 35 litre capacity bags on offer, there is plenty to choose from, although the largest 35L bag wasn't available for review at the time of writing.

Light and capacious, each product has room for all your photographic equipment and even a tablet. There is a removable

camera insert, but even with this, the space is well organised and roomy. The 'AW' in the brand name refers to the bag's 'All Weather Cover', which is stored discreetly in the base and pulls over the entire bag like the rain cover on a backpack.

The messenger bag-style flap with press-release buckles allows quick and easy access, so you won't always need to have your camera hanging from your neck to rattle off those quick shots when you see a fleeting bird appear.

There is an easily adjustable padded shoulder strap and meshed side pockets with enough room for a water bottle or field guide, while a slimmer bag-length pocket on the back allows you to slip your favourite birding magazine inside. The internal and external materials seem hard wearing.

There are three fairly standard sizes, with space for a digital camera body and a selection of lenses, allowing for an 18-55 mm attached lens in the small 7L version, 70-300 in the 17L and up to four 70-200 mm lenses in

the largest model. The medium version is probably the most appropriate for the wandering bird photographer, and certainly the most practical in size.

These are affordable and very portable bags that are well suited to storing and transporting a wide range of camera equipment, albeit not the longest telephoto lenses. However, for a day's walking through a reserve or photographing from a hide, the Nova Sports bags should hold all you need for a productive session.

**David Callahan**



#### More info

**Nova Sport 7L** £49 • Dimensions: 22x16.2x20 cm • Capacity: 21x13.5x17.2 cm • Colours: red or grey • Weight 0.5 kg  
**Nova Sport 17L** £65 • Dimensions: 35.5x22.5x23.7 cm • Capacity: 29x17.7x21 cm • Colours: red or grey • Weight 0.8 kg

# Best cross-platform listing app?

## REVIEW

### Bird Journal

**BACK** in 2001, Mark Cocker referred to "measuring life out in lists of bird names" in his seminal book on the hobby, *Birders*. How far the humble list has come in the last dozen or so years. Technology, particularly mobile technology, has changed the way that many of us keep our lists and our bird records. Running in parallel, the resurgence of interest in other taxa such as moths, insects, mammals and so on has presented other issues for the keen record-keeper and lister.

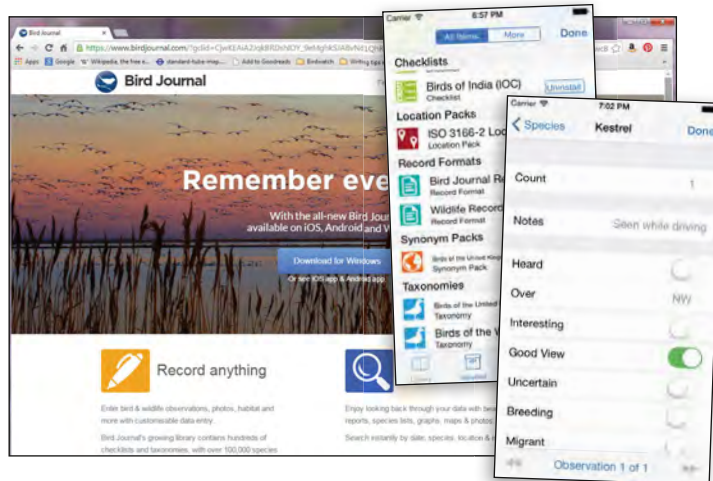
Bird Journal isn't new to the market, but it offers a sound platform for recording both birds and many other areas of interest. Recognising the diversity of technology we use, developer Bluebird Technology offers multiple solutions from iOS and Android apps to desktop-based versions for home entry.

The latest version allows the user to sync records seamlessly across all devices, including worldwide and wildlife observations. Bird Journal may have started life as a bird-recording tool, but the inclusion of taxonomies and checklists in

this latest version now covers a huge range, from the amphibians of Europe to the water bugs and allies of the UK.

The apps themselves are completely free to download and install, and local bird observations can be kept using a free account. A premium subscription is available offering full library access and analysis features. These 'bells and whistles' range from time-based summaries, a range of graphs, bar charts and pie charts analysing entries, location mapping and a linked photo gallery. Simple user-friendly layouts with clear instructions add value without over complication.

I added the iOS app to my iPhone and tested the data entry and set-up. The app opens with a summary page showing entries for today, the last seven days, this month or year and so on. You can switch to look at the individual entries and species recorded. The detail behind the species shows the first, last and total observations. Data entry is simple: once the location is entered the app switches to a species list, from which you search and add entries, along



with counts and any other user-defined note fields, for example habitat or weather.

Counts are entered on scrolling columns of numbers; the option to switch to simple keyboard entry would be useful. Currently the biggest issue with the iOS app is that the desktop-based software isn't Mac compatible, so syncing the desktop and app data and the full benefits of the premium features aren't available. Bluebird says it plans a Mac version.

The inclusion of different recording formats such as eBird and BirdTrack offer additional flexibility to use Bird Journal to record for those schemes and still benefit from the premium features.

For Windows users with an Android phone, at £34.99 for the full suite of premium features, Bird Journal offers as good a solution for the keen list- and record-keeper as is available anywhere. For Mac/iOS users, however, patience is the keyword.

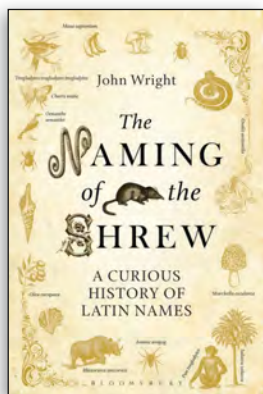
**Alan Tilmouth**

#### More info

From Bluebird Technology • Free (or £34.99 for the premium version) • 18.7 MB • Requires iOS 7.0 or later • Version 4.0 • [bit.ly/bw271BirdJournal](http://bit.ly/bw271BirdJournal)



# What's in a scientific name?



'LATIN' names' or – more accurately – scientific names are often key to the hobby of birding when discussing what we have seen and its relation to other birds. In ornithology, they are essential to describing the objects of study to genus, species or subspecies level. However, it can't have escaped many people's notice that they sometimes have an intriguing

resonance, with familiar words, surnames and sometimes even humorous inclusions popping up in each binomial or trinomial.

Clearly, the two-part scientific name has had a complex history since being formally introduced in the 10th edition of Linnaeus's *Systema Naturae* in 1758. The ensuing quest to categorise animals and plants is deftly told in *The Naming of the Shrew*. This is particularly pleasing as many of the textbooks explaining the rules of nomenclature are dry and unwieldy, and this enjoyable book also acts as a helpful summary of the basics.

Beginning with his own awakening childhood awareness of the fascinating linguistic turns of scientific names, the author quickly explains the origins, purpose and usefulness of such nomenclature, filling the tale with anecdote from the off. Common Shrew *Sorex araneus* got its arachnid last name from

the legend that its bite was as nasty as a spider's. There are large number of flowers named after Greek gods, and invertebrates named after rock bands and musicians, as well as *Star Wars* and Tolkein characters (thus maintaining the image of the geeky biologist). Many names honour the scientist who discovered the species, or equally as often a mentor or benefactor.

Every name has a story and a history, and in between relating all these Wright finds time to explain what a species is in simple terms and describes the rules and terms from type specimen to 'hoaxotype'. Wheatears *Oenanthe* have the same generic name as a group of

flowering plants, and the reasons for this are explained, along with accentors and self-heals, a genus of plants, which share the generic name *Prunella*.

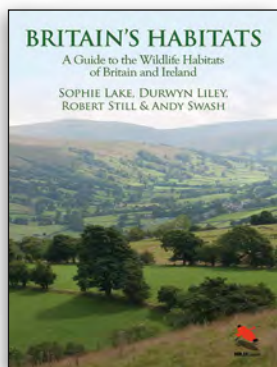
The principles of priority are laid out clearly and concisely. But it is the tales to be told that will keep you reading, and in this context Wright has kept the standard up throughout.

The usage of the binomial is still evolving. The recent naming of a South American monkey after an online gaming company's website after it shelled out \$650,000 could be a more pernicious sign of the future, but is it really any worse than the honouring of rich sponsors in the 19th century? **David Callahan**

## More info

- *The Naming of the Shrew: a Curious History of Latin Names* by John Wright (Bloomsbury, London, 2014).
- 303 pages, 20 figures.
- ISBN 9781408816981. Hbk, £14.99.

# Britain's habitats explained



**THIS** welcome book elucidates 73 habitats and their inhabitants, and illustrates them with 680 well-captioned photographs. It outlines origins and development, conservation and threats, with scattered 'what to look for' and 'did you know' entries. Many readers will enjoy the photographs of well-loved places; in my case from Inishbofin to the Norfolk Broads, and from Handa to the Exe and the New Forest. Many readers will also think, like me, 'So that's what it looks like!' when a habitat is shown and its characteristic visual features explained.

The book has neither space nor inclination to be poetic, but is tightly written and edited, making best use of the space

available without sinking into the kind of jargon that besets us so universally. It is not quite the joyful journey through the countryside found in one of my favourite books, *The Hidden Landscape* by Richard Fortey, which goes up from geology through habitats and wildlife to soils, crops, walls and hedges, and even Devon cream teas and Suffolk ales. Happily it never dumbs down, nor should it, but language is a subtle thing. Overuse of, for instance, seemingly innocuous terms such as 'species-rich', when 'rich in species' (or, 'it has a lot of beetles') would do just as well, might not encourage all readers to go further.

Its content is excellent and valuable, with useful tables and references. I would like more on flooded pits and reservoirs (a three-line caption gets the point, that these are often the basis of popular nature reserves) and 'brownfield' sites. My early wildlife encounters were on spoil heaps, abandoned railway embankments and 'waste' places on the heaths they had largely destroyed, with abundant and varied (better than diverse) life.

The book should be widely read by wildlife and landscape



enthusiasts. 'Management' of urban and recreational pressures crops up frequently; the 'managers' should read this, too.

It is an excellent summary and tribute to much of what makes our islands so wonderful.

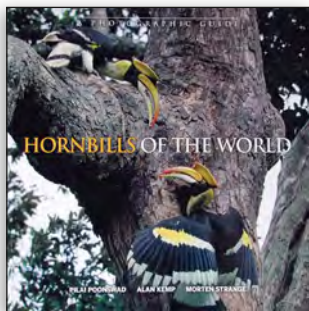
**Rob Hume**

## More info

- *Britain's Habitats: a Guide to the Wildlife Habitats of Britain and Ireland* by Sophie Lake, Durwyn Liley, Robert Still and Andy Swash (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2014).
- 272 pages, 680 colour photos, five tables, 70 maps.
- ISBN 9780691158556. Hbk, £27.95.



# New photo guide fits the bill



**PRODUCED** in association with the Hornbill Research Foundation in Scotland, this book adds much-needed funds for hornbill conservation and research through its sales (so it is a good idea to buy one!). Hornbills, found in Africa south of the Sahara and in tropical Asia, are treated in this book as 57 species and 75 subspecies within 15 genera. Some are up for grabs and numbers might change. Many live in rainforest and so, as you would gloomily expect, some have poor survival prospects, but many are happily thriving.

This is the first guide to show them in a series of superb photographs: I especially like studies of the magnificent Black-and-white Casqued, Crowned, Malabar Pied, Great, Helmeted and African Grey Hornbills. Some

62 photographers contributed a wonderful set of pictures, all properly credited in the photo captions rather than hidden away at the end.

The book is visually a feast, but there is much more to it than that. It is hard to get readers to digest introductory chapters, but these are worth your attention, discussing evolution, distribution, feeding, breeding and social life, and at the end there is the inevitable section on threats and conservation measures.

The bulk of the book consists of species accounts, which typically occupy several pages and cover taxonomy, distribution (with maps), descriptions, general habits and ecology, and a status summary with important locations highlighted. Each has a number of photographs, some of which are full-page stunners: many of these creatures are astonishing, from extraordinary to simply beautiful.

The texts are admirably complete up-to-date summaries, covering the often peculiar lifestyles of hornbills: famously, the various ways in which females and chicks seal nest entrances and remain inside for weeks on end, provisioned by the male, as



a defence against predators.

The authors could hardly be bettered. Professor Pilai Poonswad has a string of research projects, publications, degrees, medals and awards as long as both her arms. Alan Kemp studied in Zimbabwe, South Africa and the USA and has worked on hornbills all over Africa and

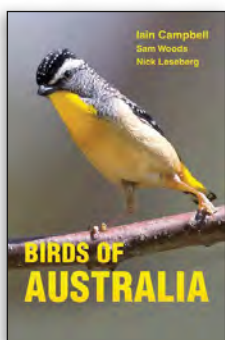
South-East Asia. Morten Strange is a publisher and photographer, studying wildlife in Asia since leaving his native Denmark and retirement from a business career in 1986. Between them they certainly know how to study birds, photograph them, and how to produce a cracking good book.

**Rob Hume**

## More info

- *Hornbills of the World: a Photographic Guide* by Pilai Poonswad, Alan Kemp and Morten Strange (Draco Publishing, Singapore, 2013).
- 212 pages, more than 400 colour photos, colour distribution maps.
- ISBN 9789810735289. Pbk, £44.99.

# Reality found wanting



**ONE** of the great contradictions of identifying birds is that field guides illustrated with paintings usually give better results than those with photos. So, as a user of Simpson and Day's *Field Guide to the Birds of Australia* (2010), copiously illustrated with paintings, I approached this new photo guide with a little trepidation.

The book contains all the resident species and regular migrants, with good maps and mostly clear and sharp images. It claims to be a "one-of-a-

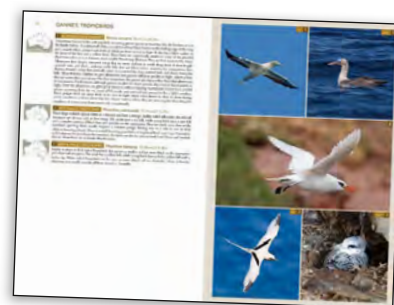
kind guide", featuring photos of "subspecies and plumage variations never before seen in a field guide". I struggled to find these, but there is a reasonable selection of contrasting male, female and immature plumages, as well as breeding and non-breeding plumages.

It begins with a passable summary of the climate and habitats of the country, illustrated with photos and including man-made habitats, before heading into the now-standard field guide layout, with descriptions and maps on the left-hand page, and images on the right. These are clearly numbered, and the descriptions do fill in some of the detail missing or perhaps hard to tell from the photographs.

The real test of a field guide is how much use it is when you're watching birds. A casual visitor with a passing interest in birds could certainly identify most of the species they see with this book, so it works for the tourist

trade, at least. However, as expected, the book is less useful when trying to differentiate between thornbills, gerygones and grasswrens, key targets for the keen birder in Australia. Similarities between, for example, Grey Whistler (and its subspecies) and 'Yellow-legged Flycatcher' (here correctly called Yellow-legged Flyrobin in accordance with International Ornithological Congress names) are not covered, whereas the possibility of misidentification is aptly drawn in Simpson and Day, along with many other confusion species pairs.

In fact, when the subject of a photograph is not well lit and



close to the camera, all the usual problems of real-life images are present, with shadow, dull light, and a merging of brown and grey tones on the many streaky birds, making comparison more difficult than it would be with a good illustration. This is better than most photographic guides, but field guides are truly a genre where artistic facsimile is more helpful than reality, it seems.

**David Callahan**

## More info

- *Birds of Australia: a Photographic Guide* by Iain Campbell, Sam Woods and Nick Leseberg (Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2015).
- 391 pages, more than 1,100 colour photographs, more than 730 maps.
- ISBN 9780691157276. Pbk, £24.95.

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# Hereford mapped



I consider myself extremely lucky to live in Herefordshire, as it is a birder's paradise in many areas. This new atlas of all the breeding and wintering birds recorded in the county is a stunning piece of work – the thorough contents are gripping. It is a book you will return to over and over again. When ornithological questions arise, the answers are likely to be here.

To produce a complete atlas of the county's birds required the work of many who took time to give of their knowledge. The Herefordshire Ornithological Club comprises several very knowledgeable people, and the book depended on five years of data collection from almost a quarter of a million records. The club's Chairman Gareth Morgan and his team worked hard to collate the relevant data; some

348 surveyors were recruited, and all are acknowledged in the appendices.

The surveys are full of vital information on species richness and populations. Breeding information is recorded, and this can make your journey to the county worthwhile as it gives an excellent idea of what to expect. There are also plenty of weather details to help plan your days out. There are large numbers of visiting species from northern Europe.

The landscapes and habitats are well covered with stunning photography and important details. Herefordshire is blessed with spectacular waterways, forests and orchards. It is the most wooded place in the West Midlands. Symonds Yat is a great location where Peregrines can be seen. There are 10 raptors in all and overwintering geese too.

The appendices are easy to use and full of useful information that will help you to plan a visit. The keys to the map symbols make it easy to find the breeding status, as well as relative abundance in summer and winter. The range maps will surely fire your enthusiasm when you realise what can be seen.

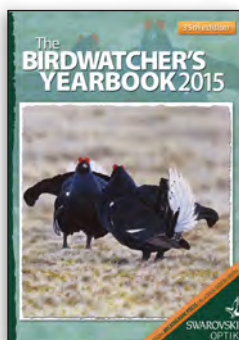
I am still finding out so much more information than I could hope for, and this book will encourage you to do the same.

**Wincey Willis**

## More info

- *The Birds of Herefordshire 2007-2012: an Atlas of their Breeding and Wintering Distributions* by Mervyn Davies, Peter Eldridge, Chris Robinson, Nick Smith and Gerald Wells (Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2014).
- 446 pages, 170 colour images, 348 maps.
- ISBN 9781781381267. Hbk, £45.

# The birding year



**THESE** days many of us go online when searching for birding information, but that can mean trawling through site after site looking for the particular nugget of data needed. Sometimes you just want all the relevant material in one place, which is exactly what *The Birdwatcher's Yearbook* aims to do.

Newly updated for 2015, the book features a guide to 370 British and Irish nature reserves,

# BOOKSHELF



Liven up your New Year reading with one of Poyser's stunning new monographs, says **Heather O'Connor**.

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Our Book of the Month is the latest Poyser release: **The**



**Barnacle Goose.**

One of the most distinctive of wintering geese, the species gets its name from the medieval myth that it hatched from barnacles – how else to explain its sudden appearance each autumn in northern Britain?

As you might expect of the Poyser tradition, the book is a comprehensive study covering subjects such as family and population dynamics, food and feeding, life cycle, survival, dispersal, migration and much

more of interest.

Also released this month is another Poyser monograph, **The Common Eider**, with **The Barn Owl** due for release later in 2015.

Looking ahead to the coming year, there are many exciting new titles currently being prepared for release, including Helm Guides to the birds of Argentina, Ecuador and Mongolia, plus an authoritative new guide to the avifauna of Europe's most ornithologically diverse region, the Iberian Peninsula. Also due for release is a pocket guide version of the hugely successful **Collins Bird Guide**, which should prove to be the ideal accompaniment for all fans of the original indispensable guide.

All our titles can be ordered online at **www.birdwatch.co.uk/store** or by using the form opposite. Remember to watch this space for all the new releases due in 2015! ■



an events diary, tide times and contact information for county, national and international birding organisations. The latest checklists for British birds, butterflies and dragonflies allow you to tick off species as you see them, while the diary and notes pages mean you can record everything you encounter.

There is also an interesting piece on the status of Hen Harrier – a bird that really hit the headlines in 2014 – written by Michael Demain of the Bowland Raptor Study Group, and an upbeat look to the future of birding by 18-year-old Liam Curson.

As might be expected, the

section on nature reserves makes up the bulk of the book. Grouped into regions and then by county, each entry includes location, access, facilities, transport, habitats, key birds and contact details. For the first time postcodes have been included to help sat-nav users. Having fact checked several sites, all information given appears to be up to date and accurate.

Even in this era of smartphones and constant internet access, this guide remains one of the most comprehensive sources of birding information – a useful resource to keep in your glove compartment.

**Rebecca Armstrong**

## More info

- *The Birdwatcher's Yearbook 2015* edited by David Cromack (Buckingham Press, Peterborough, 2014).
- 330 pages, several black-and-white illustrations, photos and maps.
- ISBN 9780956987686. Pbk, £18.50.

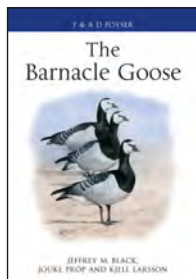
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## Book of the month



### The Barnacle Goose

Jeffrey M Black, Jouke Prop and Kjell Larsson

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Offer ends 28 February 2015

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**THIS** book represents the culmination of more than 25 years of research into the Barnacle Goose, a distinctive and handsome black-and-white species that is one of our regular winter visitors from Arctic Russia, Norway

and Svalbard. The new monograph covers the story of one of Europe's most celebrated long-term behavioural studies, detailing the lives of these social and sociable birds. Chapters include sections on pair formation and bonding, family and population dynamics, brood parasitism, food and feeding, size and shape in different populations, life cycle, survival, dispersal, migration and conservation, with particular regard to climate change. It is a rigorous and thorough examination of the lives and ecology of these birds, presented in fine Poyser tradition.

### Illustrated Checklist of the Birds of the World: volume 1, non-passerines

J del Hoyo, N J Collar, D A Christie, A Elliott and L D C Fishpool

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### The Teal

Matthieu Guillemain and Johan Elmberg

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Edited by David Cromack

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### Birding Frontiers Challenge Series: Autumn

Martin Garner

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Kowa TLS 800mm Adapter for Canon	Was £419 - Now £339
Leica Geovid 7x42 BD Rangefinding Binoculars (Yards)	Was £799 - Now £699
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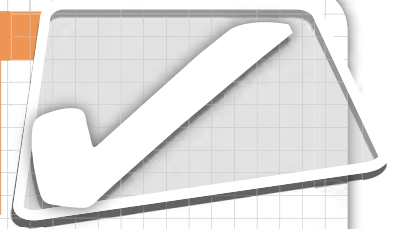
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# EXPERT ADVICE



## THIS MONTH'S EXPERT PANEL



**DOMINIC MITCHELL** is Birdwatch's founder and Managing Editor, and author and editor of several bird books. He has been birding for more than 40 years.



**CHRIS HARBARD** After many years at the RSPB, Chris is now a tour leader, writer and editor, dividing his time between Britain and the USA.



**DAVID CALLAHAN** Prior to joining Birdwatch as staff writer, David trained as a taxonomist at the Natural History Museum.



**ANDY STODDART** is Vice-Chair of the Rarities Committee with many years' birding experience, and the author of several books and ID papers.



**LYDIA FRANKLINS** is a European veterinary specialist in wildlife population health at the Zoological Society of London.



**MIKE LANGMAN** is a full-time bird illustrator whose work has featured in numerous books, as well as at almost every RSPB reserve.

The best tips, advice and more  
**www.birdwatch.co.uk**



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Find and recognise different feathers relevant to each month of the year.

## 83 ID tips

Finding a Greater Scaup on your patch is always good news – but be sure it's not the much commoner Tufted Duck.

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A threatened subspecies of Knot is to be protected in North America.

## 87 Building skills

Live up the year ahead with these alternative lists – or come up with your own!

## HOW TO ...

# Improve your birding in the New Year

**NEED** help with your resolutions? Here are some great ideas to boost your New Year birding:

### Buy a new bird book



Whether it is a field guide to an previously unexplored area, a species or family monograph or a book of birding tales, there is nothing better for

whiling away a few hours when not birding. Go to the Birdwatch Bookshop at **www.birdwatch.co.uk/store** for a range of titles at discounted prices.

### Find a new local patch



Even if you have a favourite local area for birding, you can add a little

variety to the species you see with a second patch. It's best to choose somewhere with different habitat, so if you usually head to a wetland, try a forest or moorland (pictured: Puxton Moor, Somerset). Google Maps can help you identify a likely area, as well as give directions: **www.google.co.uk/maps/**.

### Get the BTO Atlas ebook



The British Trust for Ornithology's hugely impressive Bird Atlas 2007-11 is now available as an ebook, downloadable

to Apple and Kindle devices. A snip at £26.99, you get the entire Atlas at your fingertips – accounts, maps, everything. A valuable resource without adding weight to your bookshelf. Go to **www.bto.org/shop/bird-atlas**.

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the most comprehensive online resource to all the birds in the world, containing the contents of the 17-volume *Handbook of the Bird of the World*. For a small fee, all of this, plus updates, is available. Go to **www.hbw.com**.



### Visit 12 new nature reserves



Make a point of going to 12 new nature reserves during the year. You may see some different birds and meet new people,

and by visiting you support the organisations that run the reserves and help them to continue. RSPB (**www.rspb.org.uk**; pictured: Arne RSPB, Dorset) and the Wildfowl and Wetlands Trust (**www.wwt.org.uk**) are the obvious benefactors of your new-site-per-month plan.

### Subscribe to BirdGuides

If you don't already, then you really should. More than the most comprehensive bird news service, it is also an online magazine with articles and reviews, a huge image database and a guide to Western Palearctic species, as well as a resource for all past rarity records for Britain and Ireland. Go to **www.birdguides.com**.





BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

# The feather challenge



STEVE YOUNG (WWW.BIRDSONFILM.COM)

As with some other egrets, in the breeding season Great Egret grows long, delicate plumes on its back. Known as 'aigrettes', these feathers were highly prized in Victorian times as adornments for ladies' hats, and egrets were hunted in great numbers to supply this trade.

**HERE** is a challenge for all birders at the start of the new year. Instead of aiming to simply see certain birds, try looking for and identifying specific feathers. Many species have specialised plumage adapted to their particular lifestyle. Here are some examples of what you might want to look out for in 2015:

## January Long-tailed Duck central tail feathers

The two central tail feathers of an adult male are 22 cm long, while the ones next to them are 13 cm, with the others being 6-8 cm. These feathers are moulted and regrown once a year, during the period of wing moult, while the body feathers undergo several moults, or can even be continually moulted, uniquely among ducks.

## February Heron and egret breeding plumes

The breeding plumage of Great and Little Egrets includes spectacular scapular feathers. These long and filamentous plumes were known as 'aigrettes' in the Victorian plumage trade. Look for these beautiful feathers draping down the backs of the birds, even extending past their tails. Other smaller plumes can be seen on the breast and head.

## March Outer feathers of a Common Snipe tail

When performing its display flight, known as 'drumming', a Common Snipe flies high into the air, before diving down with its tail feathers spread. This produces a humming or whirring sound as the outer two tail feathers vibrate in the air. Each feather has a hinge along the vane which allows it to produce an 'aeroelastic flutter' like a flag at speeds between 30 and 50 mph, and this results in the sound.

## April Black Grouse tail feathers

The lyre-shaped tail of a displaying male Black Grouse is produced by the outer four feathers on each side of the 18-feather tail. Each of these has its outer third curved outwards, and the birds fan them out as they strut around at their spring leks.

## May 'Spoons' of a Pomarine Skua

The extremely distinctive two central tail feathers of an adult Pomarine Skua are elongated, spoon shaped and twisted along the shaft. While obvious in the breeding season, they can become broken and are also shed during winter moult to be regrown the following spring.

## June Neck feathers of a Stock Dove

The colour on the neck of a Stock Dove and many related pigeon species is not due to any pigment in the feather, but is created by its structure. An outer layer of keratin reflects coloured light which changes with the angle of observation. Depending on the thickness of this layer, it varies from purple to green.

## July Mandarin wing 'sails'

The drake Mandarin Duck, arguably the most colourful of all ducks, has a most unusual feather. It is an enlarged tertial which is as broad as it is long, with one normal, iridescent blue vane, and a huge bright orange vane which projects to form a 'sail' on each closed wing.

## August A crane's 'bustle'

Common Cranes can now be seen in several parts of Britain, and the unusual tail feathers of the adults, which resemble a Victorian bustle, are in fact enlarged tertials which hang down behind the bird.

## September Tail feathers of a Treecreeper or woodpecker

Most birds which climb up tree trunks and along branches have special stiff tail feathers with a thicker and strengthened central shaft. They must be thick enough

not to bend when the bird leans back, spreading them to share the load.

## October Blue wing feathers of a Jay

Many jays, especially North American species, have bright blue feathers, and so does 'our' Jay in Europe. The primary, secondary and greater coverts, as well as the alula, have their outer vanes barred with bright blue, shading to white, and black.

## November Short-eared Owl 'ear' tufts

Often inconspicuous and difficult to see, these feathers form part of the owl's facial disc and can be raised when a bird is alarmed. Many owls have ear tufts, but the purpose of them is not clear as they are not linked to hearing in any way.

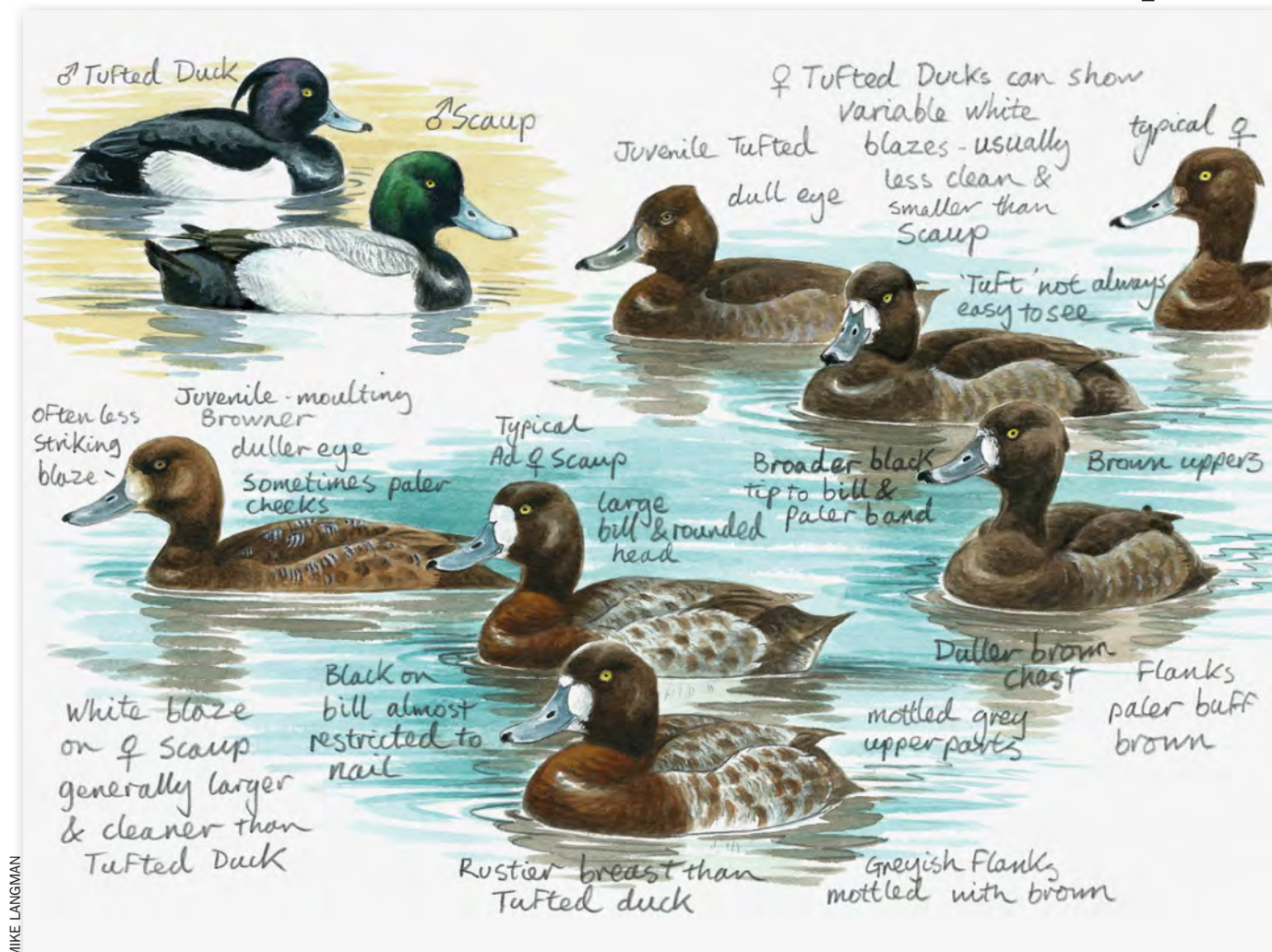
## December Hawfinch's curly wing feathers

This final challenge is perhaps the hardest, as you not only have to see a Hawfinch, but you have to see it well. On the wing of an adult Hawfinch the five inner primaries and first few secondaries have very distinct curled tips which are glossed with purple and form a distinct 'arrowhead' pattern when looking at the wing of a perched bird. ■



## ID TIPS

# Tufted Duck and Greater Scaup



**WINTER** is a good time for scouring those massed duck flocks for scarcities on a local reservoir or lake, and Greater Scaup is one of the species that birders will be keeping an eye out for. However, with a large proportion of the much commoner female Tufted Duck bearing a similar white blaze at the bill base – and with *Aythya* hybrids also possible – identifying the scaup is not as easy as it seems.

All genders and plumages of Greater Scaup are structurally different from Tufted Duck, with a bulky and smoothly rounded head. The species averages larger, and the rear end of the body tends to slope into the water, rather than show the more erect stiff tail of Tufted Duck.

Drake Greater Scaup is a subtly beautiful and slick-looking beast, with a shiny dark, metallic green head featuring a bright yellow eye. Its bright white flanks and the pale grey vermiculations (wavy streaks) on its back can make it look like

it is bandaged with white from a distance. Its livery is completed by a glossy dark blue-black chest and a black rear end.

Female Greater Scaup has a large white blaze all around its bill base, a brown head, rustier chest, pale vermiculations on its brownish back and flanks, and a dark brown rear end.

Tufted Duck always has a tuft – or at least a bump – on the rear edge of its squarer head, a dark brown back in females and a black back in males; these features alone exclude Greater Scaup.

Greater Scaup can be more shy and distant than the 'Tufties', but this is not always the case. In the field, first look for its larger size, rounded head and more sloping rear end, and then begin to analyse its plumage to ensure you've found this species. Any anomalies will generally mean you've got a hybrid, but the very rare Lesser Scaup from North America should also be borne in mind. ■

## FORTHCOMING EVENT

### ■ Birds 'n' Nature Week



**AUSTRALIA'S** Christmas Island is home to some fantastic birdlife – more than 80,000 individual seabirds nest annually, while seven of the 13 landbirds are endemic. Christmas Island Frigatebird (pictured left) and Abbott's Booby are two of the world's rarest seabirds.

The annual Birds 'n' Nature Week, which takes place on the island, is now in its 10th year. The theme for 2015 is Tropical seabird research and island endemics. Participants will have the unique opportunity to help catch Abbott's Boobies high in the rainforest canopy. You can also work with guides to study the nesting biology and foraging ecology of Christmas Island Frigatebirds and Red-tailed Tropicbirds.

If you're planning 2015's birding breaks, you might want to think about including this amazing birdfair in your itinerary. ■

**MORE INFO**

**Dates:** 29 August-5 September 2015. **Further information:** [www.christmasisland.net.au](http://www.christmasisland.net.au) and [www.facebook.com/ChristmasIslandTourism](http://www.facebook.com/ChristmasIslandTourism)



# YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

**Q** Have you any idea what this bird of prey is? I'm split between two species, Booted Eagle and Honey Buzzard. The photos were taken at Akrotiri Gravel Pits in Cyprus. Tony Reeves, via email

**A** Identification expert Andy Stoddart replies:

"Perched raptors are notoriously difficult to identify, so despite the excellent views and high-quality images it is no surprise that this bird is posing problems. Its overall plumage tones do indeed resemble a rufous/intermediate-morph Booted Eagle, but Honey Buzzards are even more variable in their plumage. On closer examination the small, weak-looking bill (weaker than the more 'eagle-like' bill of Booted Eagle) and the long, dark 'lozenge-shaped' patch around the eye identify this bird as a Honey Buzzard; the yellow cere and dark eye confirm it as a juvenile." ■

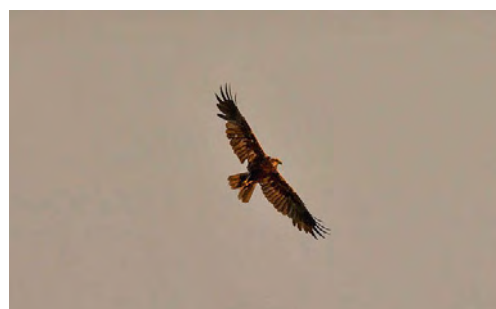
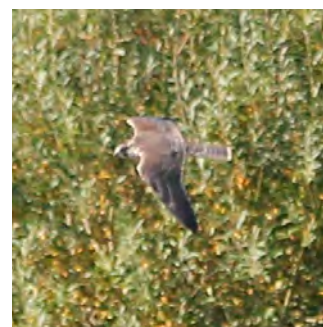


**Q** I have a house in Quinta do Lago in the Algarve, Portugal, and this raptor was in the pine tree outside my bedroom window for 15 minutes this September, before it flew off over my roof, disturbing a large number of sparrows. Please can you help me identify this beautiful bird? Mrs C L Jolly, Sutton

**A** Andy Stoddart replies: "This bird looks medium-sized, but the head seems rather broad and the bill a little strong for Common Buzzard. The dark face 'mask' (almost forming a hood), amber-coloured eyes, chalky white underparts and a pale grey undertail with no visible barring identifies this as a pale morph Booted Eagle." ■

**Q** From the forum: Martyn Roper: Could you please help me ID this raptor I saw on 6 October at a local reserve in Oxfordshire. I think it could be a juvenile Peregrine Falcon.

**A** David Callahan replies: "You are correct – it is indeed a Peregrine Falcon. Despite the distance and low resolution, the typical heavy-bodied shape of the species can be seen, as can the thick moustache. Its plumage shows some wear, but the pale fringes on the edge of the wing coverts can also be seen, indicating an immature bird, as you also say." ■



**Q** From the forum: SuffNick: Can you please help me identify this bird of prey? I photographed it last July in East Anglia.

**A** Dominic Mitchell replies: "East Anglia is a prime British region to see Marsh Harrier, particularly in the wetlands of Suffolk and Norfolk, and that is what this species is. Despite the distance of the bird, there is enough visible in the

photograph to age it as being at least one year old: it has the dark coverts of a young bird, with the mostly dark chestnut-brown plumage and cream crown and throat being otherwise similar to an adult female. The date and the bird's plumage condition mean it cannot be one of this year's fresh and immaculate juveniles; the tatty and worn appearance of the wings and tail indicate that it is already undergoing moult." ■



**Q** Can you tell me what's wrong with this House Sparrow? It's been like this for a week, being guided round by another male sparrow who chirps to it constantly, as its companion appears to be unable to see. Jane Holford-Atkin, via Facebook

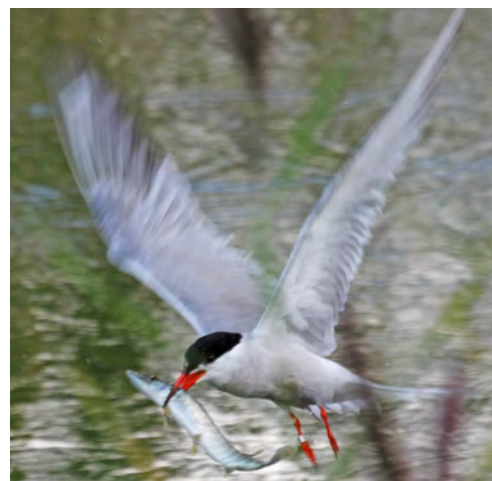
**A** Lydia Franklins, Zoological Society of London Wildlife Veterinarian, replies: "Garden birds with a variety of diseases may show symptoms which include fluffed up plumage and frequently closing their eyes due to generalised weakness. While eye conditions are relatively uncommon in wild British birds, we cannot rule this out as a cause, and veterinary examination would be required to make a diagnosis.

Please report any sightings of sick or dead garden wildlife, including garden birds, amphibians, reptiles and Hedgehogs, to the Garden Wildlife Health vets at [www.gardenwildlifehealth.org](http://www.gardenwildlifehealth.org). This information enables us to learn about the common conditions affecting the health of our native species and helps to conserve them and safeguard their welfare. Factsheets on common diseases of British wildlife and how to help prevent and control them are available on the website. If you see a seriously ill or injured wild animal that may need urgent assistance, always first contact your local vet, the RSPCA or Scottish SPCA, or an experienced wildlife rehabilitator for advice on whether to intervene and how to do this safely." ■



**Q** I photographed this Common Tern catching a Pike at Summer Leys LNR, Northamptonshire – has this size and species of prey been recorded being taken by this species before? Alan Coles, via email

**A** David Callahan replies: "The go-to guide for this kind of information is *Birds of the Western Palearctic*, where Pike is not mentioned as a recorded food item of Common Tern, so it is certainly unusual (though its role as top predator in our freshwater ecosystems would also make it scarce compared to other fish species lower down the food chain). However, fish of a similar size are eaten by Common Tern so perhaps this incident is not too surprising." ■



**Q** I saw this Dunlin in Malta on 15 October, a single bird on a wasteground puddle. From its long bill, I figured it was probably the form *alpina* but from photos, I think it might be a candidate for *sakhalina* due to its comparatively longer legs compared to other Dunlin subspecies.

Natalino Fenech's

excellent *A Complete Guide to the Birds of Malta* (see *Birdwatch* 224: 46) states that *sakhalina* has not been recorded on the island, but notes that a number of autumn migrants arrive via the Black Sea route, hinting that it is possible. I would appreciate the views of your own ID experts.

Graham Taylor, via email

**A** Wader expert Tony Prater replies: "In simple terms, I do not think one can identify the subspecies of this bird with certainty, but there are some points which may help.

"Firstly, changes in the long-established forms are now set out in *Geographical Variation in Waders* by Engelmoer and Roselaar (1998), which

is accepted by the International Ornithological Congress. In this book, rather than just *alpina* and *sakhalina*, another

subspecies – *centralis* – which breeds from the Yamal Peninsula to east of the Taimyr Peninsula, Russia, has been inserted between them and several changes have been made in the Far East.

"There is the possibility that it could be the North American form *hudsonia*. However, the fairly clear supercilium, large black belly patch and medium long bill probably rule out that form.

"The problem is that most subspecies' descriptions are of summer-plumaged birds on breeding grounds, along with measurements. By mid-October, many of the feather fringes and colours are worn and faded. This bird's plumage is in good condition, though. *Alpina* has greyish upperwing coverts, but in *centralis* they are more buff and have more white in the outer vanes of the primaries (though this is not visible in this photo). The upperwing coverts are greyish, which would lead me towards *alpina*.

"The differences in upperwing coverts between *centralis* and *sakhalina* are not described, and I haven't tried to check them out since Engelmoer and Roselaar was published. *Centralis* is rather longer legged than either *alpina* or *sakhalina*, and I agree with the observer that the bird looks to have relatively long tibio-tarsi. However, it is difficult to be sure in an individual bird, as the differences are averages between populations.

"A final point is that the subspecies have different moult timings. *Alpina* moults on passage and on its wintering grounds, whereas *centralis* and *sakhalina* begin to moult on their breeding grounds. Given this bird's plumage state relatively late in the autumn, one might expect that it had not started its moult on the breeding grounds, which again points towards *alpina*. However, one cannot see if there is any inner primary moult.

"I would expect from what I have said that this is an *alpina*, but it does look as though it could have come from the east of the range and even possibly a hybrid zone. But, I repeat, I don't think it can be assigned for certain." ■

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## ON OUR WEBSITE

# Fast-declining Knot newly classified as Threatened under US Endangered Species Act

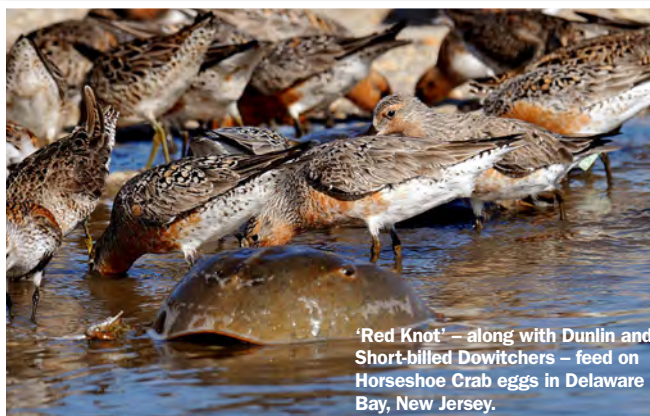
**THE** US Fish and Wildlife Service has announced federal protection for a Canadian-breeding subspecies of Knot, which is now under threat from declines in the Horseshoe Crab population.

The protection for the *rufa* subspecies of Knot (the species is known as 'Red Knot' in North America) has designated it as Threatened under the US Endangered Species Act – meaning that it is at risk of becoming endangered throughout a significant portion of its current range.

Since the 1980s, Nearctic-breeding populations of Knot have fallen by up to 75 per cent in key areas. The largest concentrations in the USA are found in Delaware Bay, New Jersey, in May, when birds stop off to gorge themselves on the eggs of spawning Horseshoe Crabs. It is the decline of this food source which is primarily responsible for Knot's decline. Other compounding threats include sea-level rise, shoreline projects and coastal development, and these continue to shrink habitats in its migratory and wintering quarters alike. Some Knot fly more than 18,000 miles each year between breeding grounds in the Canadian Arctic and passage and wintering grounds along the Gulf Coast, south-east United States and South America.

Service Director Dan Ashe explained: "Red Knot is a remarkable and

GREGORY BREESE / SPWS (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)



'Red Knot' – along with Dunlin and Short-billed Dowitchers – feed on Horseshoe Crab eggs in Delaware Bay, New Jersey.

resilient bird, known to migrate thousands of miles every year from the Canadian Arctic to the southern tip of South America. Unfortunately, this hearty shorebird is no match for the effects of climate change and coastal development, coupled with Horseshoe Crab overharvesting."

• [bit.ly/bw271redknot](http://bit.ly/bw271redknot)

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## News round-up

### MAIN STORY Migrants down, residents up

A mild summer in 2014 has resulted in resident species increasing, but migrants suffering.

• [bit.ly/bw271migrants](http://bit.ly/bw271migrants)

### ■ New venue for Scotland's Big Nature Festival

The Big Nature Festival, including Scottish Birdfair, returns in 2015 to a new venue near Edinburgh.

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### ■ Personalities change albatross behaviour

Character traits in Black-browed Albatrosses appear to influence feeding and breeding success.

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## LISTCHECK

# Updating avian taxonomy

### BOURC announces new splits

**THE** Taxonomic Subcommittee of the British Ornithological Union's (BOU) Records Committee has announced its recognition of several new species, following a number of key papers published in the last few years. Most have already been incorporated by BirdLife International and *Birdwatch*, among others.

Most keenly awaited by British birders is the split of the northern Italian and Corsican form of the subalpine warbler complex, Moltoni's Warbler, already in Category 'A' of the BOU's British list as a subspecies. Surprisingly, the committee has opted to retain Eastern and Western Subalpine Warblers as a single species until the exact taxonomic status of the North African subspecies *inornata* is ascertained.

Also of interest is the recognition of the stable hybrid Italian Sparrow as a full species. Despite its origins in the Ice Age as a hybrid between House and Spanish Sparrows, Italian Sparrow is genetically distinct and shows little inclination to backcross with populations of its ancestors in the few areas where they mix.

Also split in the paper – and previously covered in *Birdwatch* – are Common and Somali Ostriches, Shy, Chatham and Salvin's Albatrosses, Sombre and Caspian Tits, Pale-legged and Sakhalin Leaf Warblers, and Mourning Wheatear into Eastern Mourning, Arabian and Abyssinian Wheatears. ■



### Reference

- Sangster, G, Collinson, J M, Crochet, P-A, Kirwan, G, Knox, A G, Parkin, D T, and Votier, S C. 2014. Taxonomic recommendations for Western Palearctic birds: 10th report. *Ibis* DOI: [10.1111/ibi.12221](https://doi.org/10.1111/ibi.12221).



Moltoni's Warbler on Fair Isle, Shetland, on 17 May 2014 – the second record for the sainted island.

DAVE PARNABY



## BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

# Ten alternative birding lists

AURÉLIEN AUDEVARD



Siberian Chiffchaff is treated as a subspecies of Common Chiffchaff by most authorities, but it could be a full species. If you keep note of all such forms that you've seen you could increase your life list as taxonomic revisions are made.

**LISTING** can add a new dimension to your birding; the most common lists are life, year, country, county and local patch. These do not have to be competitive – though many are – but can just be to keep a record of all the species you see and where and when, adding to your enjoyment of your birding. There many other lists that could be kept just for fun – here are a few ideas:

### 1 Subspecies list

For this you will have to choose a taxonomy to follow – Clements, Howard and Moore or the International Ornithological Congress (IOC) are all possibilities. It is worth ensuring that you keep a list of

all subspecies seen, just in case any taxonomic revisions result in 'armchair ticks'.

### 2 Sound list

Different from listing heard-only birds, this covers all those birds that you have identified on sound alone, without assistance from others.

### 3 Photo list

Photographing birds well is challenging, but digital cameras and smartphones mean that just about anyone can grab a quick image of almost any bird. So why not keep a photo list – your images don't have to be of publishable quality, just a record shot will do.

### 4 Dream list

No, not the birds that you would like to see, but the ones you have dreamt about. For this you will definitely need a notebook by the bed, as dreams often fade on waking and some of the birds could be truly fabulous.

### 5 TV or film list

Keep a list of all birds seen in TV shows or films. You can start with wildlife programmes like *Life of Birds* or *Planet Earth*, but birds can turn up in almost any show or film. It's best to avoid heard-only species unless you are sure the soundtrack is genuine.

### 6 Dip list

Why not keep a list of those

species you have gone to see and missed? When you finally do see them they can be removed from the list. This will surely be the only list you have that you will want to become shorter!

### 7 Green list

Keep a list of all birds seen while on a walk or bicycle ride, or seen at a location visited by walking or cycling. No places visited by public transport or your car can be included. River trips using a canoe or other hand-powered craft could be, though.

### 8 Virtual list

This would include all birds seen on live webcams, or any other live feed which streams images in real time. No recorded video or images could be counted. There are a wide range of live images from bird nests and bird feeders especially.

### 9 Train list

If you travel by train regularly, then keeping a list of what you see can help make journeys more enjoyable. Some trips could be planned to pass by good birding areas. Always check the journey beforehand so as to sit on the best side of the train, and make sure to get a seat with a good forward view.

### 10 Airport list

Birds seen while waiting within the confines of an airport. Many birders have found themselves stuck in an airport or only able to take a brief walk outside, but nevertheless, this can provide some good birds.

If you keep an unusual list or have an idea for one, let us know at [editorial@birdwatch.co.uk](mailto:editorial@birdwatch.co.uk). ■

## SUNDAY HIGH TIDES IN JANUARY

Full moon date is Monday 5 January

	4th	11th	18th	25th		4th	11th	18th	25th
Exe Estuary (Starcross)	06.06	10.17	04.33	10.09	Teesmouth	02.50	07.11	01.27	07.01
Devon	18.31	22.38	17.07	22.34	Durham/Yorkshire	15.09	19.17	13.54	19.15
Poole Harbour (town quay)	08.23	00.37	07.18	04.11	Holy Island	01.34	05.56	00.04	05.44
Dorset	20.52	12.20	19.47	12.17	Northumberland	13.52	18.08	12.30	18.05
Langstone Harbour (Northney)	10.59	03.07	09.39	02.49	Firth of Forth (Cockenzie)	01.51	06.08	00.24	06.07
Hampshire	23.28	15.19	22.13	15.10	Lothian	14.10	18.13	12.53	18.19
Thames Estuary (Sheerness)	11.51	03.56	10.24	03.49	Morecambe Bay	10.37	02.37	09.19	02.24
Kent	–	16.22	22.54	16.17	Lancashire	22.58	14.53	21.45	14.46
London Bridge	00.44	05.13	11.37	05.05	Dee Estuary (Hilbre)	10.15	02.16	08.58	01.59
Greater London	13.08	17.38	–	17.33	Cheshire	22.36	14.31	21.23	14.21
Colne Estuary (Wivenhoe)	11.29	03.30	10.03	03.21	Loughor Estuary (Burry Port)	05.33	09.47	04.13	09.37
Essex	23.53	15.54	22.35	15.49	Carmarthenshire	17.54	22.07	16.40	22.03
Blakeney Harbour	05.53	10.18	04.32	10.00	Severn Estuary (Berkeley)	07.10	11.28	05.43	11.15
Norfolk	18.15	22.37	16.59	22.26	Gloucestershire	19.33	23.48	18.13	23.40
Hunstanton	05.38	09.57	04.13	09.44	Belfast	10.19	02.37	08.59	02.20
Norfolk	17.58	22.06	16.42	22.01	Co Down	22.42	14.45	21.26	14.38
Blacktoft	05.58	10.26	04.34	10.08	Dublin (North Wall)	10.56	03.03	09.40	02.57
Yorkshire	18.20	22.42	17.01	22.32	Co Dublin	23.20	15.11	22.08	15.12





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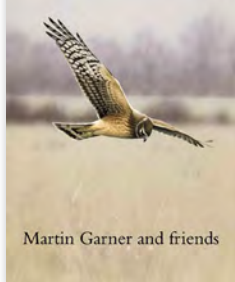


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- Cormorant, Shag or something more unusual? Next month's ID photo guide looks at both subspecies of the familiar Cormorant, as well as Shag and the mega-rare Double-crested Cormorant – learn how to separate each one with certainty.
- Research into the origins of birds is undergoing a revolution right now. David Callahan summarises the revelations of the latest findings, including how birds lost their teeth, became singers and evolved from dinosaurs.

**Plus Patchwork Challenge 2015, six great late winter itineraries, all the latest rarity highlights and big stories, complete bird news round-ups from the BirdGuides.com team, optics, book and app reviews, columnists Mark Avery and Mark Cocker, and the essential Q&A section with our ornithological experts.**

**February issue on sale  
29 January 2015**



# your letters & photos

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@BirdwatchExtra

## Sticky wicket

I am writing to congratulate the author of 'Getting away with murder' (see last month's *Birdwatch*, pages 36-39). I too am a member of a Raptor Study Group and must remain anonymous, but I can confirm that the article is accurate in every respect.

I have toyed with the idea of writing to your magazine in similar vein over the past year, but I am glad I didn't – I could not have matched the power and fluency of this article.

We need a law of vicarious liability, framed without any get-out clauses. We need the existing cross-compliance rules to be rigorously enforced (no tax-payer money should go to estates where wildlife crime occurs).

We need these estates to operate under licence. If the shooting interests continue to deny this systematic law breaking then, regrettably, a ban may be the only way forward.

We certainly need the RSPB to give its massive membership unequivocal guidance, and in return we need to defend it from the spurious dissembling of the Ian Bothams of this world.

**Name and address supplied**

## Different class

'Getting away with murder' raises some key issues regarding the continued blatant persecution of birds of prey, not least the arrogant disregard of the law by members of the 'establishment'.

The author is correct, in my opinion, in stating: "They do not regard themselves as criminals and behave as though the laws simply do not apply to them." Such an attitude is a direct result of the social class and inequalities that still exist in our country, predominantly on the part of the Conservative Party and the public school system. This 'we know best' attitude to our countryside and wildlife is borne out by the continued calls from the faithful for the resumption of Fox hunting and

Badger culling.

Unless the class system can be broken, I see little hope of the situation changing. In the meantime, let us hope that the epetition instigated by Mark Avery is successful (see [t.co/RIE3xCL26g](http://t.co/RIE3xCL26g)), although I fear that it may be blocked by the very people who need to change their attitudes.

**Graham Goodall, via email**

## Tally ho

As a subscriber of long standing I wanted to congratulate you for taking a more robust stance on illegal persecution in our countryside.

Here's hoping that the recent sterner pronouncements from the RSPB against wildlife persecution are just the start.

Thank you for showing courageous leadership.

**Ron Kinrade, via email**

## Dubious support?

A new online campaign called You Forgot The Birds mentions

your magazine and editor as supporters, paraphrasing your editorial (see *Birdwatch* 268: 3): "Many bird lovers including *Birdwatch* magazine are concerned that [RSPB] campaigning and fundraising are being put before habitat creation."

Is this a true representation of your position? Do you really support You Forgot The Birds, which is quite obviously a pro-hunting organisation?  
**Chris Wright, via email**

• **Dominic Mitchell replies:**

**"You Forgot The Birds, fronted by Ian Botham and others with connections to the shooting industry, has deliberately misused quotes from the magazine, without our permission, in a blatant attempt to gain respectability. As I made clear in last month's editorial, we absolutely do not support this website, nor its spurious motives in attacking the RSPB, and have taken legal advice on the way it has wilfully misrepresented us."**

## Join the debate online

twitter

• **'Getting Away With Murder' excited opinion online:**

**@1RossMason:** "It's great that @BirdwatchExtra are getting the truth out there. A massive well done to the raptor monitor!"

**@zacksda10:** @MarkAvery @BirdwatchExtra you've just convinced me 2 buy a mag I've not read 4 years. Sounds fascinating, bet it'll have my blood boiling!"

**@dauurica:** "Got my copy of @BirdwatchExtra – great articles on grouse moors and global warming and what it means for birds. Fantastic work guys, keep it up."

**@PaulGalloway72:** Nice work: bold & thought provoking 'getting away with murder' feature #raptorpersecution #wildlifecrime

**@Dotterel4:** Still think grouse moors are managed for wildlife? Read the raptor monitor's article in @BirdwatchExtra this month for truth #HenHarriers.

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**This Ring Ouzel met its end in a rail trap – however, the fact that it is uncovered makes it illegal, and underlines the many liberties the owners of hunting estates seem increasingly willing to take.**



NAME WITHHELD



## Flaming June

I am an avid reader of *Birdwatch* and see that you have published an article on climate change (see *Birdwatch* 270: 40-43). I am a butterfly ecologist based at the Environment and Sustainability Institute, University of Exeter, Devon, and thought you may be interested in seeing this graph which has been included in a paper to the *Journal of Insect Conservation*.

Note that it is the June mean maximum temperatures (that is, the warmth of June

days) from 1997-2010 at St Catherine's Point lighthouse, Isle of Wight. Let's not be in any doubt that climate warming is a reality. Obviously the couple of degree rise will affect insects more than birds – but undoubtedly as many birds feed on insects the rising temperatures will affect them too.

**Dr Robin Curtis, via email**

## Mystery history

**MANY** conservation bodies are eager to chase after political influence, lobbying for power and perhaps financial support, and in doing so, endanger their reputations for reasoned responses to problems.

Unfortunately *Birdwatch*, by apparently endorsing the political efforts of Mark Avery, is beginning to follow this path. Mr Avery is perfectly justified in holding his political beliefs, which obviously include wanting an end to gamebird shooting, but one would have hoped for at least a regular and appropriate viewpoint in response from those who disagree with his views to be put forward in your magazine.

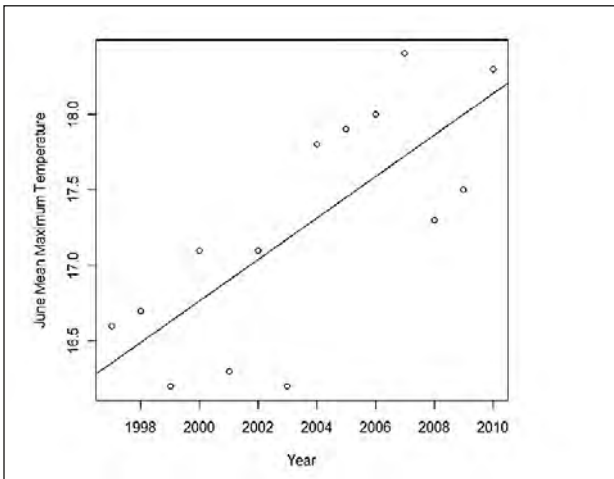
The positive aspects of land management for

grouse moors for other bird species are ignored by Mr Avery, and his apparent anti-Conservative party views receive considerable airing in *Birdwatch*. I write as someone who is not a member of any political party and who does not own or have any involvement in upland land management, but as someone who would like to see a full review of such issues rather than polemic discussions in the magazine.

If, as Mr Avery argues, driven grouse shooting is "so damaging to ... water quality, flood risk and green house gas emissions", I would be most interested in reading a response by someone explaining the level of danger caused by this activity in a reasoned way.

**Richard Butler, via email**

• **Mark Avery replies:** "I can't speak for 'conservation bodies', only myself. My column is entitled 'The Political Birder' – the clue is in the name. Birds don't get a vote, birders do: we must speak up for them. I do not want an end to game shooting; if I did, I would say so. I want an end to driven grouse shooting, as do at least 20,000 others – see this link: [bit.ly/groushshoot](http://bit.ly/groushshoot). Evidence for damage to ecosystems from grouse moor management? Try here: [bit.ly/emberstudy](http://bit.ly/emberstudy), which summarises the EMBER study by Leeds University. I look forward, with no confidence, to the next Labour government so that I can demonstrate my even-handedness in chiding all ineffective politicians."



A graph showing increasing maximum June temperatures from Dr Robin Curtis and his team's paper in the *Journal of Insect Conservation* (2014), entitled 'The Rise and Demise of the Glanville Fritillary on the Isle of Wight' (currently in review).

## STEVE YOUNG'S PHOTO CHALLENGE

# The winner



**NOVEMBER'S** photo challenge was to take interesting images of the familiar Tufted Duck.

Steve Young said: "Tufted Duck was a very popular challenge, with some really good entries, but I loved this shot by Angela Trew as soon as I saw it. Proving that you don't need a bird large in the frame to win competitions, Angela has chosen to allow the spray made by the bathing 'Tuftie' to fill most of the frame, placing the bird to one side of the viewfinder and creating a very different-looking image.

"The fact that the shot is backlit has further emphasised the spray, and the dark and silver water greatly adds to the effect. Congratulations to Angela, who wins a copy of Ron Toft's *National Birds of the World*."

• Turn to page 72 for this month's photo challenge.





# LUCY MCROBERT

## Let's get together

Competition among conservation organisations is damaging, says **Lucy McRobert**. It's time they started working in partnership if they want to get their message heard.

**B**ack in November, I attended the Communicate Conference in Bristol, which brought together environmental campaigners from around the world and from across the sector, all with a story to tell.

Through the myriad of narratives, one point has really stuck with me, both in terms of how lovely it would be in principle and yet how unachievable it is (at present), and that is a call for the NGO movement to 'drop the pointy elbows'.

It is the view of many that there is too much competition between environmental charities. People feel that NGOs are spending more time watching what other organisations are doing than sending out clear, cohesive messages that have the backing of the entire sector. Their projects, stories, requests and demands have become mired in misunderstanding and confusion.

There are so many e-petitions, twitter trends, campaigns and so on that it becomes exhausting trying to keep a track of them all, and if I'm overwhelmed (and I work in conservation!), how must it feel to even the most sympathetic of observers, wanting to make a difference but being bombarded with demands and dogma? The emotional 'pull' is easily lost.

Despite this, however, there are some excellent examples of partnerships that do work, resulting in *The State of Nature* report (2013) and Act for Nature, a new Wildlife Trust/RSPB campaign which ultimately seeks the passing of a Nature and Wellbeing Act, to enact new laws to restore nature and increase everyone's access to it. These equal partnerships represent nature conservation in its most powerful, contemporary form. Delivered at a local level, joint projects are often even more dynamic.

### The fight goes on

While we are heading in the right direction, there are still alleged incidences of the staff of one charity contacting the suppliers and partners of another to demand exclusivity for their own products. Another is rumoured to have lodged formal complaints against natural history programming because a rival organisation was mentioned too many times.



RILEY JOHNSON (COMMONS.WIKIMEDIA.ORG)

The infighting between conservation NGOs is undermining their message; it's time for them to start working together.

“There are alleged incidences of the staff of one charity contacting the suppliers and partners of another to demand exclusivity for their own products”

These issues aren't coming from perceived enemies but from organisations that should be allies, and it undermines the great work that is going on. It's the kind of thing you'd expect to see from supermarkets using television adverts to discredit each other.

This is complicated further as we recognise that multi-taxa projects, ranging across vast landscapes and incorporating complex ecosystems – so-called 'rewilding' – are the future of conservation: one size does not fit all. Organisations are not the only ones having to adapt their ideas: the general public – our conservation army – are too.

We are living with the legacy of our Victorian heritage, which saw the rise of a whole swathe of taxa organisations, which have morphed into the familiar NGOs that we have today: birds, mammals, invertebrates and plants all have their representatives. Had our ancestors had a little foresight, maybe they would have recognised their similarities rather than emphasising their differences, and that a couple of organisations could have done the job nicely.

The late, great Derek Moore OBE (see last month's *Birdwatch*, page 33) believed that we only need two conservation organisations: one for practical environmental work and science, and one for the education of the public. Now there's a thought. ■

**Lucy McRobert returns in March.**





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**AS** the first birding magazine to introduce a dedicated annual travel supplement more than two decades ago, we've published a wealth of material on prime holiday destinations at home and around the world. For a long time now we've also put our knowledge to practical use, partnering with specialist tour operators to offer you the chance to experience such destinations first hand. Indeed, this travel supplement now shares its name with our World of Birds reader holiday programme, so it's only fitting that 2015's tours introduce this issue's 'Great destinations' theme.

A quick browse of the places and species on offer should whet your appetite for a trip with us in the year ahead. Among departures this coming spring are the Georgian Caucasus, with its unique mix of montane specialities and regional endemics, and the steppes and mountains of Kazakhstan, home of Black Lark, Ibisbill and an impressively long list of other enigmatic species. Summer brings the possibility of the rediscovered Brown Fish Owl in Turkey within reach at last (see pages 16-18 for more on my recent experiences with this species), while in the autumn we return to the rarity-laden destinations of Shetland and the Azores. For a departure with a difference in September, we are also the exclusive UK partner for a new and affordable autumn voyage from Iceland, home of Europe's only Harlequin Ducks and Barrow's Goldeneyes, to Fair Isle and ultimately The Netherlands.

Please see pages 4-5 for more on these and other trips in our reader tour programme, and elsewhere in this issue for further ideas for fantastic holiday birding, including the hinterland of the Portuguese capital, Lisbon, 10 of the world's top birding destinations and tips on cruises suitable for birding. Bon voyage!

*Dominic Mitchell*

## Birdwatch

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**Cover: Harlequin Duck by Glenn Bartley (www.birdimagery.com) – Iceland is the only place in Europe where this beautiful duck can be found. Above: Pallid Scops Owl by Dominic Mitchell (www.birdingetc.com); a little-known species, this diminutive owl can be seen in Turkey.**





# Where in the world?

**There's no better time than the depths of winter to plan your next birding trip, and our professionally operated selection of 2015 reader holidays has guided tours to suit everyone.**

**S**o many places, so little time! Sometimes it's hard to know where to begin when choosing your next birding holiday – we know that feeling well. So to help make the task easier, we've put together our own range of recommended reader tours to destinations with a proven track record for first-class birding.

For starters, we have two great spring tours in Europe. First up is Georgia, where we'll target the specialities of the Caucasus Mountains, including several Western Palearctic species difficult or impossible to find elsewhere – notably

**Caucasian Snowcock, Caucasian Grouse, Güldenstadt's Redstart and Great Rosefinch**, as well as **Armenian Gull, Green Warbler** and many other regionally hard-to-find species. We're also delighted to return to Bulgaria, one of Europe's foremost birding destinations. Its sought-after birds include the enigmatic **Wallcreeper** and several species at the western edge of their breeding ranges, notably **Pied Wheatear** and **Paddyfield Warbler**. Moreover, the spectacle of spring migration here is exceptional, with streams of raptors, waterbirds and passerines pouring north in May.

## Island birding

For an affordable but shorter spring break closer to home, look no further than Texel in The Netherlands. The great variety of habitats on this famous island have produced more than 370 species, at least a third of them rarities. **Spoonbill, White-spotted Bluethroat** and **Icterine** and **Marsh Warblers** all breed, and groups of

**Dotterel** occur every May. During easterlies, migration can be outstanding. Our first Texel tour last spring was an outstanding success; join us for a repeat performance this coming May.

Later in the month, our inaugural reader holiday to Kazakhstan gets under way. With some 200 species possible during the tour, it's easy to see why this Central Asian republic is so popular. The list includes some of Eurasia's most enigmatic birds, not least **Himalayan Snowcock, Demoiselle Crane, Ibisbill, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Black and White-winged Larks, White-tailed Rubythroat, Severtsov's Tit-warbler, Azure Tit, Saxaul Sparrow** and **Red-headed Bunting**. Add to that an optional extension to Uzbekistan, where **Pander's Ground Jay, Pied Stonechat** and **White-capped Bunting** are among further possibilities, and this tour – guided by *Birds of Kazakhstan* author Arend Wassink – could be the trip of a lifetime.

Further west in Asia, the rediscovery of **Brown Fish Owl** in southern

IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): WALLCREEPER BY DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM), BLUETHROAT BY ROY DE HAAS (WWW.LAGAMI.NL), HARLEQUIN DUCK BY MARC GUYT (WWW.LAGAMI.NL), WHITE'S THRUSH BY JIM NICOLSON, NORTHERN PARULA BY DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)







BLACK LARK BY MACHIAL VALKENBURG

chance to find our own scarce and rare migrants, as well as the chance of über-rare Siberian vagrants – in September 2014 pride of place went to a stunning **White's Thrush** watched at close range, while **Rustic Bunting** and **Arctic Redpoll** were among the other rarities, and **Barred** and **Yellow-browed Warblers** were widely encountered.

In mid-October, we return to the Azores for our annual feast of American vagrants, along with the endemic **Azores Bullfinch**; since we pioneered this tour, which remains the only guided departure targeting rarities in the islands in October, well in excess of 60 species of Nearctic vagrant have been logged by *Birdwatch* Managing Editor Dominic Mitchell and his groups in 14 previous visits. If past megas such as **White-tailed Tropicbird**, **Willet**, **Yellow-billed Cuckoo**, **Yellow-throated** and **White-eyed Vireos**, **Hooded**, **Myrtle** and **Yellow Warblers**, **Northern Parula**, **Baltimore Oriole** and **Rose-breasted Grosbeak** appeal, book early to avoid disappointment (last year's trip was sold out and 2015's is already a guaranteed departure).

Last but by no means least, we have a new autumn trip with a difference – a cruise in September which begins in north-east Iceland, passes the Faroe Islands and visits prime-time Fair Isle before traversing the North Sea to end in The Netherlands. With an optional pre-tour in Iceland targeting specialties such as **Harlequin Duck**, **Brünnich's Guillemot** and **Gyr Falcon**, and the real possibility of rarities on Fair Isle and a wide range of **skuas**, **shearwaters**, **storm-petrels**, **auks** and **Sabine's Gull** at sea, this exclusive and affordable cruise will surely prove popular.

With so many enticing options, we look forward to seeing even more of you join us on our expanding range of birding holidays in the coming 12 months. Happy New Year! ■

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- 10-18 October 2015; £1,660 including flights.
- More information: Archipelago Azores (email [info@azoreschoice.com](mailto:info@azoreschoice.com) or call 01768 775672).

#### **Bulgaria**

- 3-10 May 2015 (optional extension to 13 May); £1,125 including flights (main tour; extension from £215).
- More information: Balkania Travel (email [ognian@balkaniatravel.com](mailto:ognian@balkaniatravel.com) or call 020 7536 9400).

#### **Georgia**

- 1-11 May 2015; €1,195 plus flights.
- More information: Birding Breaks (email [info@birdingbreaks.nl](mailto:info@birdingbreaks.nl) or call 0031 20 77 92 030).

#### **Iceland to The Netherlands cruise**

- 22-29 September 2015 (optional Iceland pre-tour 19-22 September); from €950 (main tour; pre-tour €550) plus flights/ferry.
- More information: Birding Breaks (email [info@birdingbreaks.nl](mailto:info@birdingbreaks.nl) or call 0031 20 77 92 030).

#### **Kazakhstan**

- 19 May-2 June 2015 (optional Uzbekistan extension 2-8 June); £2,999 (or £3,999 with extension) including flights.
- More information: Oriole Birding (email [oriolebirding@gmail.com](mailto:oriolebirding@gmail.com) or call 01656 711152).

#### **Shetland**

- 26 September-3 October 2015; £1,145 (excluding travel to/from Shetland).
- More information: Shetland Nature (email [info@shetlandnature.net](mailto:info@shetlandnature.net) or call 01957 710000).

#### **Texel, The Netherlands**

- 7-11 May 2015; €725 (excluding travel to/from Amsterdam).
- More information: Birding Breaks (email [info@birdingbreaks.nl](mailto:info@birdingbreaks.nl) or call 0031 20 77 92 030).

#### **Turkey**

- 22-25 June 2015; £1,175 including flights.
- More information: WildWings (email [tours@wildwings.co.uk](mailto:tours@wildwings.co.uk) or call 0117 965 8333).

Turkey is one of the most amazing stories to emerge from the region in recent years, and our exclusive new June tour has a good chance of connecting with this almost-mythical predator. We'll also target the near-endemic **Krüper's Nuthatch**, sought-after **Caspian Snowcock** and range-restricted **Radde's Accentor**. Add to that list such desirable possibilities as **Lammergeier**, **Chukar**, **White-backed Woodpecker**, **Alpine Accentor**, **Olive-tree**, **Eastern Orphean**, **Rüppell's** and **Eastern Bonelli's Warblers**, **Wallcreeper**, **Alpine Chough**, **Masked Shrike**, **Asian Crimson-winged Finch**, **White-winged Snow Finch**, **Red-fronted Serin** and **Cretzschmar's Bunting**, and participants have a veritable treat in store.

### **Autumn's best**

Three great autumn departures round off 2015's exciting programme, two of them returning favourites. Shetland in late September brings another welcome





# Capital birding

If you're looking for a destination that combines the comforts of a city with stunning sights like flocks of Greater Flamingos, displaying Great Bustard and eagles overhead, Lisbon could be the ideal choice, says **Alan Tilmouth**.



Southern Grey Shrike is one of the target birds at the Tagus Estuary. As with other members of the shrike family, it creates a 'larder' by impaling prey on branches.

Cities probably don't feature too highly on many birder's 'must-visit' lists. European capital cities in particular are much more likely to be left behind once out of the airport and hire car compound. A glance across the Tagus Estuary at night into the vast areas of darkness that fan out east and west along the southern shores from the snake-like Vasco da Gama bridge, before fading into a network of saltmarshes and rice fields, is enough to realise that Lisbon, Portugal's capital, might be a little different.

For birders used to catching up on some sleep while covering big distances between hotels and good birding areas, being tipped out of the car into an explosion of birdlife, just 20 minutes after leaving your city centre hotel, can be a little disorientating. Close your eyes to crowds of elegant Iberian commuters and open them to flocks of equally elegant flamingos and egrets.

## Rich with birds

On falling and rising tides, the south shore of this major estuary teems with movement as huge flocks of Greater Flamingos, Spoonbills and Little Egrets make the commute to favoured feeding areas. Wildfowl crowd the water edges, pressed close like passengers on public transport, while large waders jaywalk the mudflats during periods of passage. Turnstones roost on brightly coloured John Dory-like artisanal fishing boats, while dumpy Ringed Plovers scurry on the foreshore, the occasional sandy hue of a Kentish Plover standing out among them.

Scan the grassy banks and expect to find the dark low-flying silhouette of a Marsh Harrier, as well as the occasional perched Peregrine Falcon. Clouds of dark ducks – Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Teal and Mallard – along with pink pinpricks of Greater Flamingos, rise in the distance in chaotic murmurations, urged into flight by a pair of patrolling Bonelli's Eagles, a small number of which claim the estuary as their hunting grounds. The Bonelli's drift across with skyscrapers as a backdrop rather than cliffs, a reminder that Lisbon lies just a short distance to the north.

High tides hide the feeding areas and the birds retreat to the network of rice fields, salt pans and arable





Just a few miles from the centre of Lisbon, the Tagus Estuary offers elegant flocks of Greater Flamingos and waders such as Avocet and Collared Pratincole.

land extending south from the estuary and reached along dusty tracks flanked with holm oaks, patrolled by secretive Azure-winged Magpies. Spotless Starlings act as sentinel guards, and now and then a Hoopoe flicks away on rounded wings from the grassy verge – these areas are rich in birdlife. Beyond one muddy gate is a motionless Squacco Heron, over the next rise White Storks stare back from a farm track, and a blaze of yellow reveals one of the local exotic Yellow-crowned Bishops that shine brightly from the phragmites stands. Southern Grey Shrikes are another possibility in the right habitat in this landscape.

Each salt pan seems to have its own blend of birds: a posse

of Black-winged Stilts here, an avalanche of Avocets on the next, while periodically a Green Sandpiper breaks for cover. Zitting Cisticolas dart among the tamarisks and in autumn and winter Bluethroats perch up among the squadrons of European Stonechats along the scrubby track sides. In the summer months a small number of Collared Pratincoles breed in protected areas off the estuary, hawking the skies over nearby fields.

#### Within easy reach

For travellers with more time available, a short hour's drive south opens up the rolling steppe habitat and river valleys of Portugal's Alentejo region, and with it access to many Iberian specialties.

The stony fields peppered with sheep offer some great birding, from majestic Great Bustards browsing on the high skylines to the torpedo-like fly-pasts of the local Black-bellied Sandgrouse. Raptors are abundant, with Spanish Imperial Eagles mixing it in the skies overhead with the occasional Bonelli's, and Short-toed and Booted Eagles throughout the spring and summer months.

While Rufous-tailed Scrub Robin and Western Orphean Warbler are the big passerine prizes in the breeding season, the sheer numbers of birds in this farmland as compared to the near desert-like conditions of parts of the British countryside provide a satisfying backdrop. Clouds



Head to Portugal's Alentejo region for the bizarre sight of displaying Great Bustards.



Collared Pratincole (above) and Montagu's Harrier (below) are part of a new project combining tourism and conservation.







RICHARD BONSER

**Left:** Yellow-crowned Bishop is a native of Africa, but feral birds have successfully colonised Portuguese wetlands such as the Tagus Estuary.

**Right:** stunning river valleys in the Alentejo region offer the opportunity to look for Blue Rock Thrush.

**Below:** the region also holds important colonies of Lesser Kestrel.



NATALINO FENECH

of Corn Buntings compete with soaring Calandra Larks over fields filled with Crested Larks and the occasional Tawny Pipit.

River valleys such as the Guadiana Valley Nature Park offer a complete contrast, with dramatic pine-fringed rocky gorges in which to search for the ever-enigmatic Blue Rock Thrush or pick out one of the small number of White-rumped Swifts to breed in southern Europe. Lifting your eyes skyward is almost certain to be rewarded with the ubiquitous Griffon Vultures, but in the right locations these share their airspace with smaller numbers of Black Vulture and Golden Eagle.

## Protecting species

The Alentejo region holds important colonies of Lesser Kestrels, with a number of specially adapted nesting towers or abandoned farm structures occupied, as well as a nestbox scheme located on a high bridge above a dramatic river gorge. It is these diminutive raptors, along with another slim-line breeder, Montagu's Harrier, as well as the Tagus Estuary Collared Pratincoles, that form the core of a unique new offer blending volunteering, local conservation work and guided birding from the long-established Birds and Nature Tours Portugal.

The new Birds and Conservation five-day short break will see participants experience the best of birding in southern Portugal, and also get involved in a number of local conservation projects. One morning will be spent helping to monitor Collared Pratincole breeding colonies on the Tagus Estuary, while later

in the tour participants will be able to spend time up close with Lesser Kestrels and Montagu's Harriers in the Guadiana Valley Nature Park as young birds are ringed.

These activities offer a unique opportunity to help add to the knowledge of threatened species at a European level and give participants a chance in a lifetime to observe endangered species at ultra-close range. Developed to help visiting birders contribute directly to the conservation of these three species, a significant part of the tour price goes

directly to the two protected areas involved with the project, helping to purchase rings, radio devices and monitoring equipment for future use in these conservation projects.

Lisbon and Alentejo offer some great birding with little travel effort, and can easily be combined with the cultural delights of Portugal's capital city to satisfy non-birding partners. With a programme designed to put back into the conservation of some key rare breeders in the region, it offers a short-break destination with a unique twist. ■



MIGUEL ROLO

## Portugal

### Visiting

- For more information about the Birds and Conservation break and other tours, contact Birds and Nature Tours ([www.birds.pt](http://www.birds.pt); email [booking@birds.pt](mailto:booking@birds.pt); tel: +351 913 299 990).
- Visit Portugal: [www.visitportugal.com](http://www.visitportugal.com).
- Several airlines fly to Lisbon from UK airports including TAP Portugal ([www.flytap.com](http://www.flytap.com)), easyJet ([www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com)) and Ryanair ([www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)).

### Further reading

- *A Birdwatcher's Guide to Portugal, the Azores and Madeira Archipelagos* by Colm Moore, Goncalo Elias and Helder Costa (Prion, 2014, £17.99) – order from £15.99 at [bit.ly/bw271Portugal](http://bit.ly/bw271Portugal).

### Online resources

- A checklist of all birds recorded in Portugal: [www.birdlist.org/portugal.htm](http://www.birdlist.org/portugal.htm).



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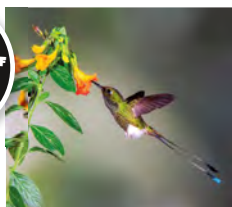
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Watching dancing Red-crowned Cranes in Japan is surely one of birding's ultimate thrills.

# Your birding bucket list

**David Callahan** suggests 10 top birding destinations that you should try to make sure you visit during your lifetime.

It's often been noted that there are about 10,000 bird species in the world, but unless you commit yourself to a life spent chasing them to the detriment of everything else (which has been known), most of us have to figure out how to get the most 'bang for the buck'.

Along with trying to see as many unique species as possible, there's also other wildlife and the whole spectacle of nature to consider. With all this in mind, many of us have a 'bucket list' of the choicest destinations, and you can be certain that the following locations will feature on quite a few.

STUART ELSOM

## 1 SRI LANKA

The number of endemics and availability of other wildlife are often key considerations when choosing a birding trip, and one significant centre of endemism is the huge island of Sri Lanka, jutting into the Indian Ocean south of India. The country is now at peace and has a list of 435 bird species, and among its 235 resident species are 33 which exist nowhere else, some of which – like Green-billed Coucal and Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush – are endangered, and many of which are a riot of colour that will appeal to even the casual birder. Add to this the possibility of seeing Leopard, 107 species of reptile, 245 species of butterfly and some great whale watching offshore, and the country is certainly one of the prime destinations in Asia.

## 2 JAPAN

Another island of endemics off the coast of Asia is Japan, but being further to the north this country is more affected by seasons. However, despite the departure of many of its breeding species, late winter is probably the best time to visit the country for the sheer awe of its ice-bound Steller's Sea and White-tailed Eagles, which can be seen up close via boat trips off Hokkaido. The sizeable Blakiston's Fish Owl can also be seen at stake-outs in the area, while



Blakiston's Fish Owl is another striking species available in winter in Japan.

STUART ELSOM



## WORLD OF BIRDS

Red-crowned Crane can be found near the owls at Kushiro Marshland. Many visitors also hit the south of the mainland for further crane species dancing and displaying, while for others Japanese Macaque, well known for its seemingly bizarre penchant for bathing, will be high on the hit list.

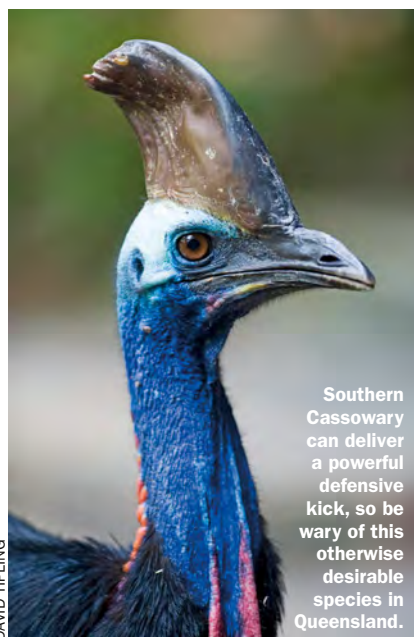
### 3 AUSTRALIA

Australia is a whole continent of hundreds of endemics, but if you only have a chance to visit once, the state of Queensland should provide you with a concentrated selection of what the country has to offer. Perhaps one of the best locations in Queensland is the World Heritage Site of Daintree, in the wet tropical north of the region. Lesser Sooty Owl and Victoria's Riflebird (a kind of bird of paradise) are among the possible endemics, while Buff-breasted Paradise Kingfisher, Boat-billed Heron and the essential Southern Cassowary are all found there. Lodges include the famous Red Mill House as a base from which to search for birds, but mammals such as Swamp Wallaby and Echidna may also be seen.



PHIL CROSBY

Widespread in South America, Blue-crowned Trogon should be prominent on your list in Ecuador.



DAVID TIPLING

Southern Cassowary can deliver a powerful defensive kick, so be wary of this otherwise desirable species in Queensland.

### 4 TANZANIA

No list of this sort can be complete without at least one African destination, and among the many impressive countries is Tanzania, which holds not just most of the East African specialities and megafaunal mammals, but many endemic species of its own for the more intrepid

birder. Chief among Tanzania's many wild riches must be the Serengeti NP and Ngorongoro Crater, which are home to around two million large mammals, along with numerous lovebirds, Glossy Starling, weavers, shrikes, rollers and many more. An extension on your tour to the Arc Mountains will add tricky warblers, white-eyes and sunbirds to your list, and there are still a few discoveries to be made in the region.

### 5 ECUADOR

South America is a continent well known for hosting the world's largest number of bird species, and Ecuador has logged more than 1,600 of them – the highest avian diversity for its area in the world, and a premium choice on the birder's bucket list for scoring the largest number of ticks in the shortest amount of time. Over a relatively short distance out of the



STUART ELSOM

Cerulean Warbler is high on the target list of American wood-warblers to see when visiting Texas during migration.





**Bristle-thighed Curlew** is a very restricted-range wader on its breeding grounds in Alaska.



**Spectacled Eider** is one of several charismatic seabirds to get on your Alaskan list when visiting at any time of the year.

capital Quito you can investigate the special birds of the Andean mountains to the extensive grasslands and moist Amazonian rainforests. The sheer number of species is both breathtaking and bewildering, and you will be spending most of your time from dawn to dusk trying to sort out amazing numbers of different toucans, antpittas, seedsnipes, woodcreepers, hummingbirds, antbirds, ovenbirds, trogons, cotingas and manakins, with barely enough time to take many of them in. Neighbouring Colombia to the north has almost as many species, and is now back on the birding map.

## 6 BRAZIL

For a more wildlife-orientated classic South American destination – though still with plenty of amazing birds – Brazil is ideal, particularly the awe-inspiring Pantanal, which is the world's largest tropical wetland. The country is simply too big to fully cover in a trip of just a couple of weeks, but the Pantanal will provide a buffet selection of the main flavours. While searching for the elusive large mammals such as Jaguar, Ocelot, Giant Anteater, Brazilian Tapir, Giant Otter, Maned Wolf and Capybara, you will be watching Hyacinth Macaw, Brazilian Merganser, various curassows and guans and Cock-tailed Tyrant, among hundreds of other bird species. It's not all about the wetlands and rainforest; these numbers are increased by the incorporation of adjacent grasslands and dry gallery forest.

## 7 TEXAS

In the developed world, it's hard to beat the Rio Grande Valley on the Texas-Mexico border for birding thrills, and

a trip taking in all of the sites of the southern part of the state is an easy way of accumulating dramatic birding memories among the richest avifauna in North America. Migration periods and winter are most productive for a visit. It is the best place to see the small surviving population of Whooping Crane, along with huge concentrations of geese, ducks, Sandhill Cranes and waders. Raptor migration is astonishing at times, while many Mexican species such as Ferruginous Pygmy Owl, Green Parakeet, Plain Chachalaca, Green Jay and Ringed Kingfisher extend their range from Mexico into the province of many southern US specialities. Central American vagrants pop up every spring and autumn, too, so make sure you pack a Mexican field guide as well as *Sibley*!

## 8 ALASKA

While less exotic, Alaska makes up in spectacle what it lacks in heat. As well as legendary large mammals like Grizzly and Black Bears, Wolf, Moose and Wapiti, the Arctic tundra provides plenty of breeding wildfowl such as the rare Emperor Goose and Spectacled and Steller's Eiders, a greater range of auk (or rather auklet and murrelet) species than the North Atlantic provides, and truly spectacular scenery. A two-week spring visit should provide returning migrants such as Bristle-thighed Curlew, Gyr Falcon, the striking Aleutian Tern and Golden-crowned Sparrow, along with a good range of western passerines. Offshore among the myriad seabirds are Sea Otter and Humpback Whale.



The curiously-named **Pyrrhuloxia** is an eye-catching cardinal species to watch out for when birding Texas.



Lesvos is the westernmost outpost in the range of Cinereous Bunting, and it can be seen on a spring trip there.



our only official endemic species. Cairngorm NP will allow you to add Ptarmigan, Black and Red Grouse, Dotterel and Snow Bunting to your list, and a late spring visit will also provide some noteworthy migrants. The truly perfect place to observe this phenomenon is Shetland, another birding bucket list region, and there is a good selection of places to stay there, along with an established and inclusive birding network to keep you in the loop when the frequent rarities show up. ■

## 9 LESVOS

Despite all the exotic choices available to the jet-setting birder, don't forget the cheaper and closer-to-home option of a European destination. Spring and autumn migration on the Greek island of Lesvos is legendary, and on top of the migrants, breeding birds include Olive-tree and Rüppell's Warblers, Krüper's Nuthatch, Masked Shrike and Cinereous Bunting. It's ideal for families as well as novice and expert birders, with plenty of colourful Eurasian species such as Greater Flamingo, European Bee-eater and European Roller, and tricky *Ficedula* flycatchers and warblers to sift through. The island is also easy to

get around, and has a healthy tourist infrastructure and great Greek cuisine.

## 10 SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS

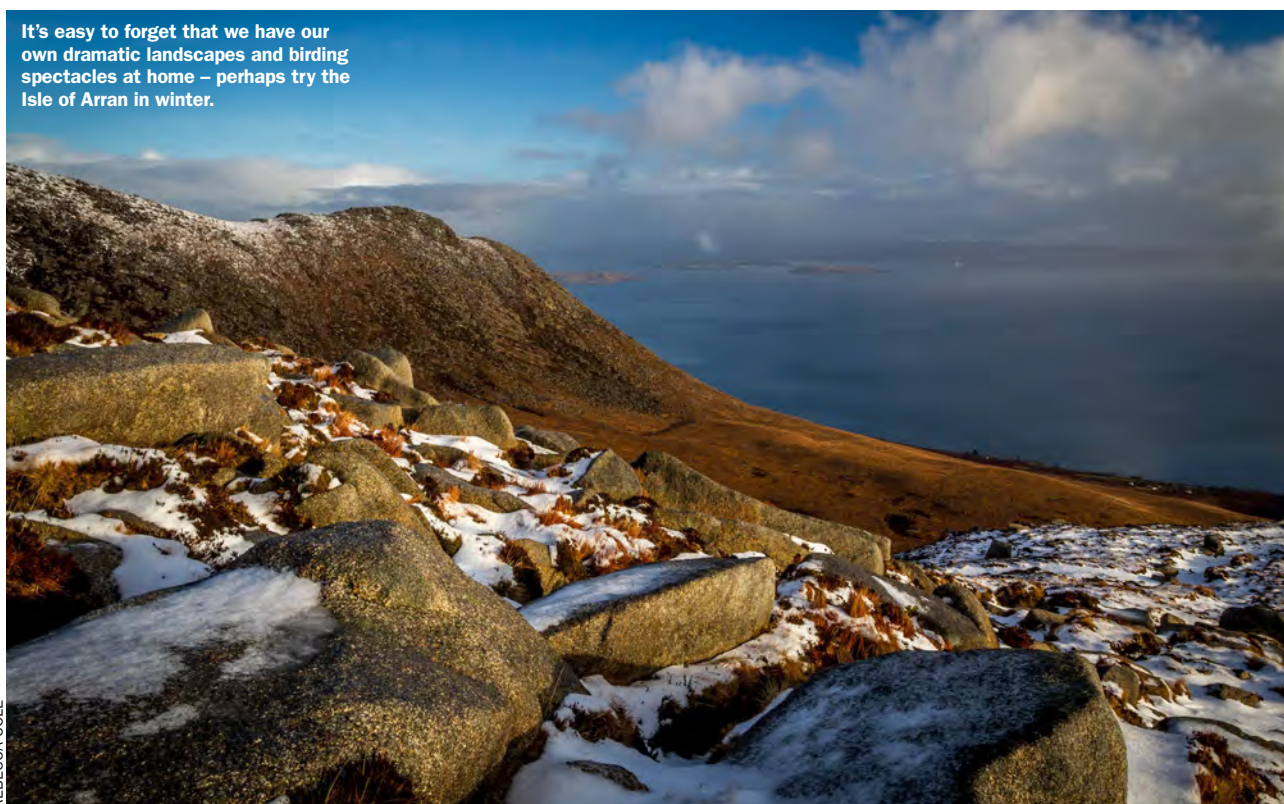
Last but not least, we have our own birding Meccas here in Britain, and most will try to take in the Scottish highlands and islands at least once in a lifetime. Along with its breathtaking geology and huge expanses of both natural and planted pine forest, Scotland produces the listing goods too. It's the only place you are likely to see White-tailed and Golden Eagles, and the only place it is possible to see (or rather hear) Scottish Crossbill,



RICHARD BROOKS

European Roller is one of numerous colourful spring migrants to be seen on the bird-rich island of Lesvos.

It's easy to forget that we have our own dramatic landscapes and birding spectacles at home – perhaps try the Isle of Arran in winter.



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# In search of the fisher king

Nocturnal, secretive and known from only a few records in recent decades, one of the Western Palearctic's most desired specialities has at last been rediscovered. **Dominic Mitchell** went on the trail of Brown Fish Owl – and plenty more – in southern Turkey.

I had to pinch myself to believe what I was looking at – or rather, what was looking at me. Not far up the rocky slope, from the shade of a gnarled tree sprouting out of the rock face, a pair of large yellow eyes returned my gaze. Their owner sat motionless, unfazed yet keeping a watchful eye on proceedings.

I scanned to the right and a second large bulky form came into view in the shadows of the dense foliage, its head turning periodically in slow motion as it monitored our every move from a safe distance. Then a third bird was located a little to the left, and finally the wing-tips and tail of a fourth poking out from behind a tree trunk. We had found our number one target on the first morning of the first day here in southern Turkey, and not just a single individual but a pair with their two youngsters – job well and truly done.

## Holy grail

Some birds have achieved near-mythical status in the Western Palearctic, their supreme rarity and lack of accessibility combining to give them that 'most-wanted' moniker. Brown Fish Owl, at least until a few years ago, was among them, one of the hardest-to-see regional 'rares'. The westerly extent of this Asian species' range was always poorly known, but in recent decades it ceased to be recorded regularly anywhere west of India. Once in a blue moon, a photo would emerge from an undisclosed location, or whispers would surface of its presence in some remote river canyon. But it remained largely unconfirmed until 2009, when Dutch and Turkish ornithologists finally pinned down a couple of pairs in suitable habitat in southern Turkey.

Completely by accident but almost

simultaneously, the species was then discovered at the lake where I was now standing – not as the grand finale of some intrepid scientific quest, but during a routine pleasure-boat cruise. The site quickly became known to the present generation of Western Palearctic birders as the only location where there was a realistic chance of seeing the species, which was often reliably present (though later in the year, once the young have fledged, the birds become trickier). Interestingly, this presumably small western population has also been found to be genetically distinct from those in southern Asia, and could perhaps be a separate taxon.

After enjoying such a rarely seen species at close range, and in numbers, I couldn't have asked for more. Nonetheless, I got it. Having found our quarry quickly and sated ourselves on





**Southern Turkey is the only place in the Western Palearctic that is reliable for Brown Fish Owl.**

DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)

**The rare Kurdish Wheatear is one of many desirable species that can be found in the east of the country.**



DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)

Olive-tree, Eastern Orphea and Rüppell's Warblers, Masked Shrike and Cretzschmar's Bunting.

Further east, there is an even more enticing line-up of essentially Asian birds at the limit of their range. Leave behind the pine woods and juniper-clad hillsides and journey beyond the sprawling Göksu Delta to the area around Birecik, where in sun-baked rolling countryside and rocky wadis the likes of See-See Partridge, Bimaculated Lark, White-throated Robin, communally nesting Blue-cheeked

and European Bee-eaters, and Yellow-throated Sparrow can be found. Iraq Babblers have penetrated the Euphrates Valley from Syria and can be found readily at Birecik, but for me the main target in this bustling town had to be Pallid (or Striated) Scops Owl.

A little-known species rarely encountered away from a handful of sites in the Middle East and Central Asia, this diminutive owl has regularly been reported from the town's tea gardens. On our evening visit, however, large crowds and celebrations



views of the fish owl family, we made the most of the morning by sailing out across the lake at a relaxed pace, taking in the sights and soaking up the sun. The boatmen headed for another canyon more on the off-chance than in any real hope of us repeating the feat, but amazingly we quickly picked up another Brown Fish Owl – and then two more! This second family group was in slightly more open habitat than the first, the buffy juvenile sitting out with one adult while the other kept watch from a crag a short distance away. Seven Brown Fish Owls in the space of a couple of hours – a truly incredible sight which I never dreamt I would see, and certainly not in the Western Palearctic.

### Talking Turkey

The last time I came to this part of southern Turkey, more than two decades previously, I enjoyed my first-ever looks at Krüper's Nuthatch. The area is a stronghold of this attractive regional endemic, whose world range is largely restricted to the pine forests of Turkey's hills and mountains. It shares them with a host of other exciting species, not least White-backed Woodpecker (here of the southern form *lifordi*, another potential split),

**The range-restricted Krüper's Nuthatch – classified as Near Threatened by BirdLife International – is another possibility.**



DANIELE OCCHIATO (WWW.AGAMI.NL)





Another of Turkey's most-wanted specialities is Yellow-throated Sparrow. A late arrival in spring, this elusive species favours pistachio orchards in a few areas in the south-east of the country, and is rarely encountered elsewhere in the Western Palearctic.

DOMINIC MITCHELL (WWW.BIRDINGETC.COM)

illuminated by fireworks scuppered any chance of locating this shy species. Instead, it was a chance meeting the next day at Natureparkcafe, the home of the Northern Bald Ibis reintroduction project, that was to produce a result.

The last wild colony of these ibises outside Morocco was at Birecik, but despite a large population of feral birds and valiant efforts to return them to a truly wild state, the species has lost its migratory urge and seemingly the desire to fend for itself. In the shadow of the cliffs that line the eastern bank of the Euphrates, the birds at Natureparkcafe nonetheless remain a visitor attraction, and hold out some hope for the future of preserving this critically endangered species. It was while talking to project

manager Mustafa Çulguoğlu that the subject of the owl came up, and before long we found ourselves punching the air below a tree in the town while a Pallid Scops Owl looked down on us through half-shut eyes.

### Heading on east

After thanking Mustafa, our road trip rolled on into the mountains of eastern Turkey. The distances are huge and the horizons vast, and it's easy to under-estimate the amount of travelling that a birding trip to this fascinating country entails. From Armenian Gull, Kurdish Wheatear and Cinereous Bunting to Mongolian, Asian Crimson-winged and White-winged Snow Finches, the rewards are most definitely worth it – just be

prepared to spend a long time getting from one site to the next.

Sadly, with conflict just across the south-eastern border in Syria, it seems likely that fewer birders will be visiting this more remote eastern region in the short term. But in contrast, the Mediterranean hinterland of southern Turkey remains as popular and peaceful as ever. With the added attraction of accessible Brown Fish Owls, not to mention montane specialities such as Lammergeier, Caspian Snowcock, Radde's Accentor, Wallcreeper and Red-fronted Serin at nearby Demircazik, it has already become a principal attraction on the Western Palearctic birding circuit. ■

## i Turkey

### Visiting

- For a new Brown Fish Owl tour to southern Turkey in June 2015, contact WildWings on 0117 965 8333 (email [tours@wildwings.co.uk](mailto:tours@wildwings.co.uk)).
- For general information on visiting Turkey and assistance with trip planning and arrangements, contact Umay Tours & Travel Agency on +90 256 614 6005 (email: [umay@ispro.net.tr](mailto:umay@ispro.net.tr); web: [www.umay.net](http://www.umay.net)).

### Further reading

- *The Birds of Turkey* by Guy Kirwan, Kerem Boyla, Peter Castell, Barbaros Demirci, Metehan Özen, Hilary Welch and Tim Marlow (Christopher Helm, from £48) – [bit.ly/bw271BirdsTurkey](http://bit.ly/bw271BirdsTurkey).
- *Finding Birds in Central Turkey: Ankara to Birecik* by Dave Gosney (BirdGuides, £6) – [bit.ly/bw271BirdsCentralTurkey](http://bit.ly/bw271BirdsCentralTurkey).

### Online resources

- Doga Dernegi is the BirdLife International partner in Turkey: [www.dogadernegi.net](http://www.dogadernegi.net).
- A checklist of all birds recorded in Turkey: [www.birdlist.org/turkey.html](http://www.birdlist.org/turkey.html).

# TURKEY

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# Peaks and troughs

A cruise may not be the first thing that comes to mind when planning a birding break, but the right one could offer all kinds of wildlife and destination opportunities, says **Moss Taylor**. Maybe it's time to take the plunge.

**W**hile many birders may think of cruises as being the domain of old folk who enjoy over-eating, being entertained and generally being lazy, a cruise can – if carefully selected – be a most enjoyable way of visiting parts of the world that otherwise might not be easily accessible. It's certainly true that some of the cruises I have been on have resembled floating residential homes, but this hasn't detracted from the

pleasures of days at sea and the birding opportunities in the ports of call.

## Which cruise?

I prefer cruises that do not involve a flight, but instead depart from and return to the same English port. This avoids all the inevitable aggravation at airports, and means that within a short time of arriving at your port of departure, you are on board and ready to set sail. For birders it also has

the great advantage that there are no worries about excess baggage. So tripods, telescopes, long lenses and field guides can all be packed, along with suitable clothing for any type of weather, with no concerns about weight – as long as they all fit into your cabin!

From a birding point of view, the smaller cruise ships (carrying 700-800 passengers) are far better than the huge, more modern ships that take several thousand passengers and resemble floating hotels. On the smaller vessels, there are several decks from which to watch out for seabirds and, in general, the lower the deck the better.

Cruises in the northern hemisphere are best taken in spring and summer, while the longer winter cruises south of the equator provide sunshine, as well as the opportunity to visit some of the best birding places in the world.

Without doubt, my favourites have been those to South America, even though they have involved a five-to-six-day crossing of the Atlantic, which during the winter months can be surprisingly birdless. On occasions, a whole day can easily pass in mid-Atlantic without a single bird being reported.

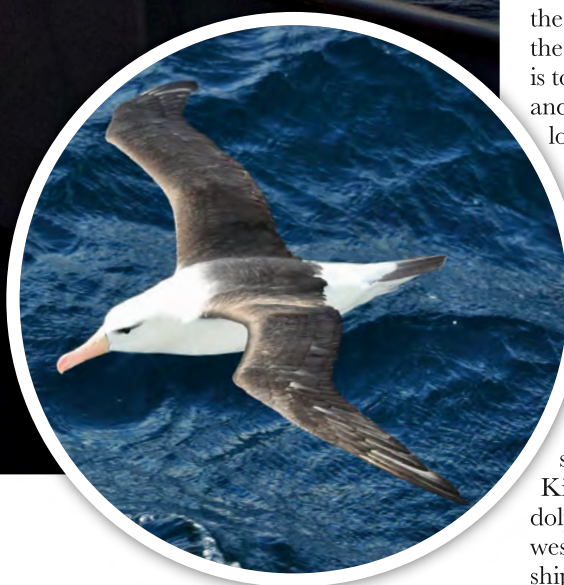


White-throated Hummingbird is one of many stunning members of its family that can be seen in Uruguay.

ALL PHOTOS: MOSS TAYLOR



A cruise isn't just for the old folks – the birding both at sea and on land stops along the way can be spectacular, with the former providing a variety of seabirds such as Black-browed Albatross (inset) in the southern hemisphere.



Most trans-Atlantic cruises sail south across the Bay of Biscay, before berthing for day stops at, for instance, Madeira, Tenerife and the Cape Verde Islands, each of which has its own avian attractions. On Madeira, Trocaz Pigeon and Madeira Firecrest are the main species of interest, while Tenerife is the home to Laurel and Bolle's Pigeons, Berthelot's Pipit, Blue Chaffinch and the recently split African Blue Tit. Although the islands' pigeons are largely confined to the less accessible laurel forests, at least on Tenerife some of the target passerines are readily found within walking distance of the harbour at Santa Cruz.

My favourite island, however, is São Vicente in the Cape Verdes, where the port of Mindelo is only a short taxi ride from the town's sewage works, located near the oil storage depot, and clearly visible as one sails into Mindelo. With its extensive old-fashioned type of filter beds, it provides ideal conditions for passage waders, as well as vagrants from across the Atlantic. During my three visits to Mindelo,

Black-winged Stilts and Kentish Plovers were not exactly unexpected, but I was delighted to find up to five Lesser Yellowlegs on each occasion, and on one memorable day both Greater Yellowlegs and Blue-winged Teal as well.

At this point, a word of warning about the organised excursions from the ship: don't be tempted into taking them! Almost without exception, they can be arranged privately far more cheaply on the quayside, by taking local taxis or even buses. Not only that, but you can choose exactly where to go and how long to stay ashore. It's often the case that other birders are also on the cruise, and by far the best plan is to make up a party of six to eight and take a taxi or minibus to suitable locations within driving distance of the harbour.

### Ocean adventures

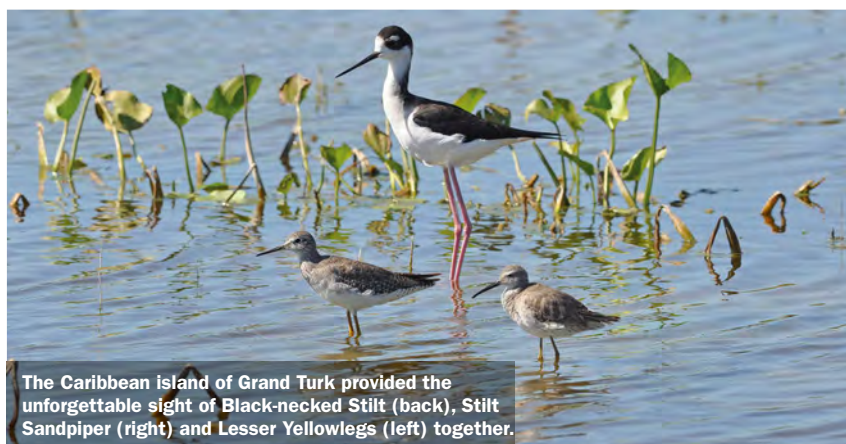
The Atlantic crossing is often a time for reading and enjoying the warm weather, but there is always the chance of shearwaters and petrels, especially in the South Atlantic or Pacific Oceans. Cetaceans such as Humpback, Sperm and Killer Whales and several species of dolphin are also possible. Once in the western Atlantic, and especially as the ship approaches the Caribbean, there are floating masses of seaweed from the Sargasso Sea in which the elvers destined for European rivers become more noticeable, along with flying fish and the first Red-billed Tropicbirds, Magnificent Frigatebirds and Masked Boobies.

Most cruises will call in at one or more of the Caribbean islands, each of which has its own fascinating avifauna, often only a short distance from the port. Some islands do not have a harbour sufficiently large to



One memorable cruise included a stop on the Falkland Islands, where Magellanic Penguin was seen.

take a cruise ship and passengers are ferried ashore in the ship's lifeboats. These smaller islands are often the best for birds. One such is Grand Turk, where two salinas just a short walk from the landing jetty act as magnets to overwintering North American waders. On one memorable occasion a Stilt Sandpiper posed with a Black-necked Stilt and Lesser Yellowlegs, creating an unforgettable threesome. Elsewhere, the Auberge Seraphine in Castries, St Lucia, hosts an egretty around a pond in front of the hotel which provides unrivalled photo opportunities. ➤



The Caribbean island of Grand Turk provided the unforgettable sight of Black-necked Stilt (back), Stilt Sandpiper (right) and Lesser Yellowlegs (left) together.



The versatile Chimango Caracara was one of several raptors logged in Chile.



### Cruising the bird continent

But of all the cruises I have been on, two to South America stand out, albeit for totally different reasons. The first, a three-month cruise on Fred Olsen's *Balmoral* in 2012, included in its itinerary four Caribbean islands, three southern states in North America, four Central American countries and five in South America. Of all the places we visited our favourite was Chile, from the point of view of the birds, the welcome extended to us by the locals and the general safety we felt during our excursions into the more remote areas.

Of the many raptors we saw in Chile, Chimango Caracara was the most widespread (after the ubiquitous Turkey and Black Vultures); this species has an amazing ability to change its outline in flight to take on the appearance of an accipiter one moment, then a harrier and even a falcon. While the weather in Chile was generally warm and sunny, it became much colder the further south we sailed. However, this did mean that Black-browed Albatrosses became far more numerous, along with five other

species of albatross. After entering the Beagle Channel we sailed around Tierra del Fuego on an atypically calm day with the sea more like a mill pond.

Our next port of call was Stanley in East Falkland, where a one-day stay simply whetted the appetite for the wildlife delights of this unique outpost of the UK. While it is possible to hire a private taxi on the island, none were available at the time of our visit and we had no choice but to take one of the organised tours, which in the event proved to be an excellent introduction to the birds of the Falklands. The highlights of the three-mile walk around a reserve to the west of Port Stanley included Magellanic Penguin, Buff-necked Ibis, Falkland Steamer Duck, Upland and Kelp Geese and Black-throated Finch.

After leaving the Falklands we sailed north to Uruguay, before continuing along the Brazilian coast to Rio de Janeiro, where we took a taxi across the city to the Rio Botanical Gardens. They turned out to be excellent for birds, especially hummingbirds, such as Reddish Hermit, Violet-capped Woodnymph

and Sombre Hummingbird, which certainly lived up to its name. The final part of our South American odyssey involved sailing up the Amazon as far as Santarém, a bird-rich journey that warrants an article on its own, but suffice it to say that it provides an excellent introduction to the wildlife of Amazonia. By the time we had returned to Southampton, my bird list for the trip stood at more than 450, in addition to six species of whale and five dolphins – a truly memorable cruise.

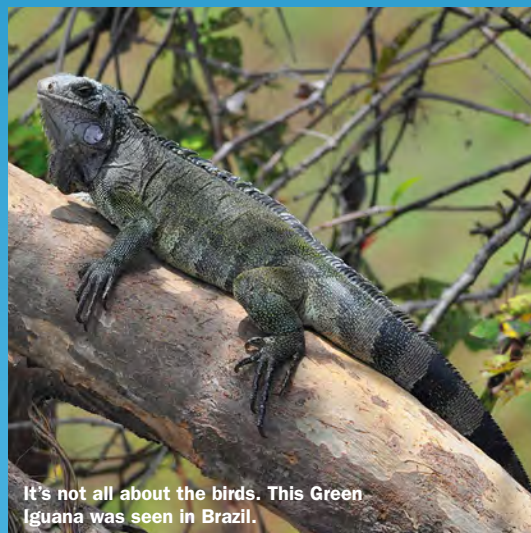
The second unforgettable trip was during the first six weeks of 2014 on board the *Marco Polo*, again a cruise to the Amazon, but this time sailing 1,000 miles upriver as far as Manaus. For birders, I would recommend a visit to January Island from Manaus, while a trip to Maica Lake is my preferred option from Santarém. Both locations offer a good variety of wetland and rainforest birds, and for non-birding partners they provide an insight into the lifestyle of the indigenous people. There is also a high chance of seeing Three-toed Sloth, monkeys and iguanas in the riverside trees.

However, what made the cruise so unforgettable was the severe weather that we encountered as we sailed back through the Bay of Biscay. With storm force 11 winds and 15-20 m waves crashing over the ship, passengers were confined to their cabins for 24 hours for their own safety. This was exceptional, though, and the vast majority of cruises are most enjoyable from start to finish.

Finally, don't ignore the late offers, which can be unbelievably good deals, and don't worry about taking an inside cabin. After all, it's really only somewhere to sleep. ■



Auberge Seraphine in St Lucia hosts an egrettry that provides unrivalled photo opportunities.



It's not all about the birds. This Green Iguana was seen in Brazil.





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